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MEN AND RIVERS

BY
HUMAYUN KABIR



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TO
THE MEMORY OF
APA AND BHAISAHIB
JAHANARA BEGUM
AND
ABDUL MAJID

PREFATORY NOTE

This is a simple story based on an ancient legend of East Bengal. It poses no problems nor attempts any solutions save those which are as old as mankind. Men have loved and suffered since the beginning of time and will do so for as long as we can perceive. The endurance and fortitude of these children of the soil have heroic proportions. We sometimes incline to look down upon them, but they remain steadfast in the midst of change and evoke our admiration with growing knowledge. The culture of the village is changing today. But it possesses values which mankind cannot lose, without being the poorer for their loss. India still lives in her villages and to understand India the world must learn her villages.

H. K.

PART I

Nazu Mia stood on the bank of the Padma and looked around. Before him stretched the waters of the mighty river. In the morning light she seemed placid and content. There was no suggestion now of her power and cruelty. Under the morning sun the waters shone with a pleasant glint. In the distance a few sand banks showed above the water. Still further near the horizon gleamed the traces of the other bank. The vast waters hurried forward—swiftly, smoothly and almost soundlessly.

Nazu Mia breathed a sigh of relief and thankfulness. Allah was merciful and he had prospered. He remembered the days when a young working lad he first came to the unsettled banks of the Padma. He had come with a group of older men. Peasants without any land of their own, they worked wherever they could. Often they travelled hundreds of miles in search of work.

It was evening when they first came upon the Padma. For a few minutes Nazu Mia stood appalled at the sight. He also had his home by a stream but it was a friendly and quiet brook that he knew. Here it seemed that the river was the very devil. For miles and miles it stretched. There seemed no end to the mad rush of waters that swirled and tossed and snarled. The current gleamed with evil speed. The gathering darkness of the evening cast a spell of gloom. In a tone of wonder and awe Nazu Mia had asked 'Is this the Ocean?'

One of the older men said with a careless laugh, 'No, you silly, this is the river Padma. Here we can find some land of our own. Here we shall settle.'

Nazu Mia remembered the days that followed their first settlement. They had to move away from villages, for all land near the villages had been taken up. There also the farmers needed hands and some of their company found work in the village. But Rahim Baksh, the leader of their group said, 'Why come all the way from Katihar to work on other

peoples' land? No, we will take land of our own and become farmers ourselves.'

Nazu Mia, a young lad of sixteen at the time, felt the wisdom of Rahim Baksh's words and said, '*Chacha*, I will go with you even if the others stay behind.' Most of the men agreed with Rahim Baksh, but a few stayed on. They wanted to be in a village where life was orderly and settled. Why move out into the wilds, where present and future were equally uncertain?

Rahim Baksh had led his men wisely and well. They had no women with them, for he said, 'Nobody shall bring a woman till we have built our houses and brought our first harvest home.' Nazu Mia had at the time laughed at this. Now he suddenly realized the wisdom of old Rahim Baksh's advice—his thoughts began to wander and he pulled himself up with a start.

No, those days were gone, gone beyond recall. The mad days of golden youth and the moments that crowd upon one another with excruciating joy. Now life was quiet and placid like the Padma on this fine morning in the late autumn. Something of the splendour of the rains still clung to her but the wildness and frenzy had gone. His life would henceforth be like this, full of kindness but without the torrents and eddies of cruelty, suspicion and jealousy.

Nazu Mia's heart filled with a sense of peace and gladness as he looked at the broad placid river. He loved her with almost a physical passion as he remembered the days he had passed with her. His life was wedded to hers when Rahim Baksh first brought him to her banks and selected a plot of land for him. It looked at first sight an unpromising plot. Marshy land by the river side in which grew wild grass and reeds; but Rahim Baksh called him aside and said, 'Don't be despondent, my lad. The soil is like gold. You can grow paddy here and get crops that are beyond your wildest dreams. In winter you can grow mustard and garlic and other crops. Labour hard and surely Allah will make you prosperous.'

Nazu Mia had worked hard. He worked from morning, before the first faint streaks of light announced *Subhe Kazab* or the false dawn. He worked steadily till the sun stood right

above his head. Then he went for his meal to Rahim Baksh's house. He had no house of his own as yet; he ate and slept with the old man, who had taken a fancy to him. With hardly a break he was back to the fields and set to work again. The shades lengthened and soon at a stride, darkness swept over field and river alike. Nazu Mia worked as long as he could. With a sigh he would then gather his tools and wander back to the *Panchayat's* house.

Those were days when there seemed no end to his energy. Nor to the work he had to do. The land had to be cleared and the grass and the reeds removed. Tilling was a problem when there were only half-a-dozen bullocks to the whole settlement. Nazu Mia had to wait for days before he could get a pair for his plot. But he was not one to rest in idleness. He even started sinking a well. The soil he raised from the well would prepare the site for his future home.

One day he was working at his well when he had a brain wave. He was not the only one to wait for his turn with the bullocks. If he could get others to co-operate, they need not wait for the bullocks at all. His friend Asgar was working on a neighbouring plot. He left his tools and ran to him. He told Asgar of his plans. Together they went to call another pal of theirs. Soon the older men saw with surprise Nazu and Asgar yoked to the plough while their friend Rahamat pushed it behind them. Others followed and thereafter the little settlement hardly felt a shortage of cattle.

Nazu Mia's brow clouded as he thought of those happy days of early manhood. Asgar had then been his dearest friend,—and now! The content and peace of his mind vanished as he looked across the canal which divided his fields from Asgar's. They were neighbours as in the days of old, but between them burnt enmity, bitterness and evil memories. Allah was merciful but why should his mercy extend equally to all? In his own fields a happy harvest smiled, but the pleasure at the thought was almost spoiled when he remembered the bumper crop expected by his rival and enemy.

The gloom in his mind deepened as he thought of the changes his life had known. It was the bitterest irony of fate

not find everything ready when I return, you will hear more about it.'

Malek snorted with impatience. Clinging to her hand, he half ran and half dragged Ayesha towards the river side. He panted as he ran and spoke as he panted. The words came crowding upon one another in his eagerness to get it all off his chest.

'You know, *dadee*,' he said, 'how I have longed to go to Gazir Tek with the fishermen and watch them fish. I have asked father again and again but he always says that it is dangerous in the big river with its cross currents and eddies and hidden sand banks. Last night Madhu and his son came in the evening and asked father for the loan of a large net. They had spotted a big shoal near the northern end of Gazir Tek and wanted to get as many hands and as many nets as they could. I thought this was too good a chance to miss and begged father to let me go. But father said I was too small and the current near Gazir Tek too strong. I kept on pressing and at last to put me off he said that he first wanted to make sure if I could handle a big *boal* all by myself. I told him I could easily handle *boal* and other big fish and had, in fact, often fished on my own. He would not believe me. I made up my mind to show him what I could do. I took the big line you keep in the *machan* and baited it with a piece of meat, for meat is what the *boal* likes best, isn't it so? Early this morning before even you were up, I went to the river side and do you know what I found?' *

He stopped to gasp for breath and also to impress her with the importance of his find.

Ayesha was listening to his prattle with amused pleasure and said, 'How could I know when it is something so novel and strange?'

'You are laughing at me,' said Malek, 'but you won't laugh very long. When I came to the river in the morning, I found the line taut and knew that something had taken the bait. I pulled at the line but it was hard, so hard that however much I pulled, it did not yield in the least. Nor was this all. The moment I pulled at the line the catch began to stir the water

MEN AND RIVERS

and, believe me, *dadee*, it was almost like a storm. I then noticed that the post to which I had tied the end of the line had been dragged almost out of the ground. I hammered it in again and made the line fast. I then went to call for help, as the fish was obviously too big for me to manage alone.'

'So your father was after all right when he said that you must first learn to handle a big *boal* by yourself,' put in Ayesha.

Malek tossed his head impatiently and said, 'If you won't listen to me, *dadee*, what can I do? First hear the story and then you can say what you like. I ran home as fast as I could and found Idris getting ready to take out the bullocks. I told him what I had seen and we rushed back to the river. I was going to take a small boat out when Idris said: "Don't go into the water, for it looks to me you have caught more than a *boal*. Better hurry home and tell your father to come with some men. I think, we have got a crocodile on the line." I rushed home and told father what Idris had said and then I came to call you. You kept me waiting, and perhaps they have already finished the crocodile.'

By this time they had reached the river bank. Malek shouted with joy when he found an excited group of men discussing how best to despatch the crocodile. By now there was no room for doubt. The dark monster had floated to the surface once and lashed angrily at the water in its attempts to get free. But the hook had caught him fast and he could not break loose.

One of the farm hands said, 'Shall we try to haul him on the line?'

Nazu Mia tried the line and shook his head. 'It is a wonder that the brute has not gnawed through or snapped the line,' he said, 'but if we try to haul him up, it is bound to break.'

Ramjan, the farm hand who had spoken before, laughed: 'It can't do that. We have strengthened the line with a coil of wire. Near the hook, the wire has been twisted to four-fold strength.'

Nazu Mia said, 'That's good and explains why the brute has not got away. But even the wire may snap if we try to

haul him to the bank. The only thing to do is to hold him fast to the line and take a boat so that we can harpoon him when he comes to the surface.'

Malek could no longer contain his glee. He came rushing to Nazu Mia and cried, 'I want to go in the boat, father.' But Nazu Mia replied with a grim laugh, 'It is no place for a child, my boy. You stay with your *dadee*, and watch from the shore.'

Ramjan said, 'We can take a boat near the brute but he is so enraged that he will try to smash the boat. If he can get home one blow with his tail, he will smash the boat. We shall then be in the water and within his reach.'

Nazu Mia replied, 'You are right. Take one of the larger boats and let men be ready with poles to beat him off if he tries to draw near. I will take the harpoon myself.'

Several of the men protested in chorus: 'You must not do that, *Panchayat*. After all, this is a young man's job. You are no longer as active and strong as you used to be. Be our leader and tell us what to do, but don't take any unnecessary risk yourself.'

Ayesha called Nazu Mia aside and said, 'What are you doing, my son? Don't forget that Malek is a mere lad. There is nobody to look after him if anything should happen to you. Listen to your old mother's words. Send somebody who is younger and stronger.'

Nazu Mia replied, 'If you tell me not to go, I won't go; but then I can never face these men again. They call me *Panchayat* and the whole village follows my lead. If it is once known that I sent others where I did not dare to go myself, will my face remain?'

Ayesha remained silent and Nazu Mia pleaded once more: 'You know, *Amma*, how Asgar is bent on becoming *Panchayat* himself. He has forgotten no more than I. Between us there can be no forgiveness. I shall be very careful, and there is hardly any danger. The brute is already fastened to the hook and in the boat we shall be many men.'

Ayesha became hard-faced at the mention of Asgar's name. Quietly she said: 'Go if you must and may Allah protect you. Take Ramjan and Idris with you. And don't be rash.'

MEN AND RIVERS

She called the two men to her and said, 'You are like my sons. Nazu Mia is your elder brother. You must be by his side and shield him. May Allah bless you all.'

The men replied in chorus, 'Don't be scared, *Amma*. So long as we are alive, no harm shall come to the *Panchayat*. Pray to Allah that we may all come back safe.'

Ayesha pulled Malek to her and held him fast in her arms. 'You shall not leave me, *dadu*,' she said, and began to pray silently for the safety of the men.

Soon the boat was ready. It was one of the largest boats Nazu Mia possessed. He chose her because she was new and the woodwork was strong and firm. She was painted black. On the prow were red vermilion marks that shone brightly in the sun. She needed three men to handle her—one to steer her and two to ply the oars or punt her along with poles. The deck was long and low. The men hurriedly built a fence round it. The fence would be both protection and support. It would break the fury of the crocodile's blows and also protect the men in the boat. On the prow they built a small platform. On this platform Nazu Mia took his stand. Ramjan and Idris stood behind him with large poles in their hands to beat the crocodile off if it should draw near. A pair of harpoons lay near their feet in case Nazu Mia failed with his first throw.

Nazu Mia took a crew of four to ply the oars. The helmsman was the most skilful boatman of the village. When all the men had taken their places, he launched the boat to loud cries of *Badar Badar*. The men on the shore shouted in unison with them. Malek's shrill voice rose above the deeper bass of the men. Ayesha, too moved to utter any word, prayed in grim and earnest silence.

The boat launched with a splash. For a moment it quivered in the strong current but was soon steadied. The boatmen pulled and rapidly drew near the disturbed water that indicated where the quarry lay. 'Give more line,' shouted Nazu Mia to the men on the shore. The crocodile felt the line loosen and made off towards the centre of the river. The men on the shore jerked the line sharply. With a cry of rage,

MEN AND RIVERS

the crocodile floated up to the surface. Nazu Mia's harpoon flew at it, struck the brute on the back, and glanced off its hard epidermis. It snarled and turned towards the boat. Ramjan and Idris were ready and before it could swing round to hit the boat with its tail, they had staved it off with their poles. Baffled, the brute went down into the water and would not rise again.

The men in the boat held a hurried council of war. They could not wait indefinitely. There was always the danger that the line might snap. Worse could not happen. The maimed crocodile would almost certainly take to man-eating, for what animal is there so easy to hunt as man?

Nazu Mia said, 'We must finish the brute, but how to do it?'

Ramjan was a dare-devil. Over six feet, he looked like a bronze Hercules. Many were the tales of his exploits. He offered to go into the water and despatch the brute if it could be brought within his depth. He laughed and said, 'It is impossible to swim and at the same time fight a crocodile.'

'Don't be a fool,' snapped Nazu Mia, 'to go into the water against a wounded crocodile is to court sure death. We must find some other means of dealing with the brute.'

Nazu Mia called to the men on the bank to haul in the line. They shouted back that the crocodile was resisting and if they pulled too hard the line might snap. They eased the line but the crocodile was not to be got a second time. It lay low and without movement. They tried to prod at it with poles to make it move. But nothing happened, for the water was too deep.

It looked like a deadlock. The crocodile could not get away and the men could not get at the crocodile. An idea occurred to Nazu Mia. He said, 'Let us try to fish it up. We will perhaps soil a net or two. If we succeed, we won't mind the loss. Even if we don't, after all we lose nothing but a net.' The men agreed, for what alternative was there?

The nets were brought. Nazu Mia chose the stoutest and heaviest of them. Slowly it was let down and the men waited with bated breath. Soon there was a violent commotion in

MEN AND RIVERS

the water. They had succeeded at last in part. The brute was disturbed and would either make away or be caught. Slowly, carefully and deliberately, they began to draw in the net. The disturbance in the water rose nearer and nearer the surface. Soon in the midst of the churning waters showed a long and shadowy form. Nazu Mia shot his harpoon at it with all his strength. He struck hard and true. The harpoon did not penetrate into the flinty skin of the crocodile, but turned it over on one side. For a moment, its belly was exposed. Quick as thought, Nazu Mia picked up a second harpoon and drove it home into the brute's belly. With a last terrible convulsion, it almost leaped out of the net. It lashed out wildly with its tail, but Ramzan and Idris were on the alert. They caught the blow on their poles which were flung out of their hands while they staggered and went down on their knees. The crocodile sank back into the net with the harpoon sticking out of its belly. Its death convulsion was terrible to see. The net sank under the weight but it held. Soon the men in the boat were able to drag the net again and haul up the crocodile.

'*Badar, Badar,*' shouted the crew. '*Badar, Badar,*' shouted back the men on the shore in exultation and joy. The boat was rowed back to the shore and the crocodile hauled up on the bank. 'It's a small one,' said Nazu Mia. 'That explains why the line held,' said Idris.

'Look at its teeth,' said Ramzan, 'it's a *muggar*, one of the worst man-eating species.'

Ayesha came up and said, 'Allah be praised that you are all safe. You must send *shirni* to the Masjid, and arrange a *milad shariff*. Is this not the first crocodile bagged by my *dadu*? You must not forget it was he who laid the line. The credit for the capture belongs to him.'

Malek was gazing at the crocodile with mingled pride and awe. Ayesha's words made him shy, and he hid his head in the folds of her dress.

CHAPTER II

The *hat* at Dhuldi was the centre of village life for miles around. It was not only a market-place where farmers exchanged their goods, sold their surplus crop and bought what they needed. It was also a rendezvous where they met weekly and discussed the hundred little things which make up village life. All stories, scandals and gossip circulated from this centre. They came back to it, magnified and distorted almost beyond recognition. It is strange how quickly news spreads in villages : there is no post, hardly any roads, and yet things which happen in one corner reach the remotest village almost in no time.

Nazu Mia was not surprised when he learnt at Dhuldi that his young son, Malek, a lad of ten, had fought single-handed against a monster crocodile of full twenty feet and despatched it with a harpoon that clove through its brain at one stroke. He listened with amusement to the men who were arguing on the point. One man held that Malek was bathing when the crocodile attacked him. Another retorted that one did not bathe with a harpoon in one's hands. Nothing daunted, the first persisted that Malek *was* bathing and one ounce of fact was worth a ton of theories. The second man had his own version of the affair. Malek had stolen away from home. He wanted to harpoon a fish, and mistook the crocodile for a big *boal*.

Fact and fancy soon made a legend out of the whole affair. Nazu Mia had to answer a hundred questions. Not that he minded it, for it made him something of a hero and he gloried in the admiration he found all round.

There was a doctor's shop in one corner of the *hat*. The Hakim, a chubby bearded man, had put up a sign-board on which his name was displayed in bold characters. Not that it helped any customers ; most of the farmers were as ignorant of letters as Adam before he ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The doctor however felt that the sign-board gave him dignity.

MEN AND RIVERS

He would lovingly ponder upon the letters that proclaimed his name. Sceptics told all kinds of stories about him and everybody laughed at him. Sometimes he would join in the laugh himself. And yet, men knew he was a kind-hearted man and they came to him with their troubles. Then he would ponder deeply over his books and mumble words which sounded strange and sonorous to the simple villagers and finally come out with a specific for the occasion. Love charms for young swains who had recently married, a pill for fever or magic water for a headache—they all came equally handy to him. Sometimes he would give no medicine but call the patient to him and recite a verse—he said it was a verse from the holy Quran—and breathe upon the patient till his ailment was cured.

Today, he forgot his dignity and rushed to the door when he saw Nazu Mia. 'Come, Nazu Mia, come in,' he said. As Nazu Mia approached, he indicated that he should sit on the *farash*.

The *farash* was spread on a platform which occupied more than half the room. It was a sheet which had once been white. In the centre of the sheet were a couple of cushions for the Hakim to recline as he waited for his patients. A few more cushions lay piled in one corner of the platform. They were given to very special patients who alone were permitted to sit upon the *farash*. Nazu Mia felt the honour. He had never before been asked to sit upon it, though he had visited the Hakim often enough.

The Hakim blew his nose and wiped it on one of his baggy sleeves. He coughed to clear his throat and said, 'Have a smoke.' His servant was a tall lanky fellow, and so thin that it was a common joke that the next storm would blow him away. The Hakim made a sign and he disappeared to return with hurdygurdy and its long coil of pipe. The Hakim politely offered it first to Nazu Mia—who was mighty tickled at all these happenings. As a mark of good manners he however said, 'After you, Hakim sahib, after you.'

'That can't be,' said the Hakim. 'You are my guest: You must have it first.'

Not to be outdone in politeness, Nazu Mia replied, 'How

MEN AND RIVERS

can that be, Hakim Sahib ? The whole locality honours you. How can I have a smoke before you are satisfied ?

In his heart, Nazu Mia wanted to have the first pull at the hookah more for the honour than for the smoke. He hoped that the Hakim would press him once more. The Hakim did nothing of the kind and began to puff. Somewhat disappointed, Nazu Mia yet kept his composure and began to speak of his recent adventure with the crocodile. Needless to say, he exaggerated the exploit. Where is the man who can resist the temptation of a little harmless self-glorification ?

This was the opportunity for which the Hakim had been waiting. 'Who has not heard of your prowess, Nazu Mia ?' he said. 'The other day, some patients who came to consult me from the other side of the Padma enquired about you, and wanted to meet the acknowledged leader of this locality.'

Nazu Mia felt elated. If his fame had travelled beyond the waters of the Padma, what more could he ask of life ? To the Hakim he said, 'It is your kindness to say so, Hakim Sahib. You are like the sun whose glory we reflect. Your fame has spread far and wide. Men come to consult you from far regions. We share in the glory which really belongs to you.'

The Hakim felt he had been sufficiently polite and came straight to the point. 'Whatever little skill I have,' he said, 'is due to the friendly co-operation of men like you. Where can I get the ingredients for my medicines unless you all help me ? The other day, Asgar Mia of your village brought me some rare herbs. I used them on patients from the other bank.'

A pang of jealousy shot through Nazu Mia's heart. If Asgar's herbs had been used on these foreign patients, they must have been told of Asgar and his doings. This Nazu Mia could not stand. 'That fellow Asgar ?' he said in a tone of asperity. 'When has he begun to call himself Asgar Mia ? What herbs can he bring that I can't get you ? You have only to command, Hakim Sahib, and you will have whatever lies in our power to bring.'

'I know it, Nazu Mia, I know it,' said the Hakim. 'That is why I have detained a busy man like you. You can now give me something that I have long sought but failed to secure

till now.'

'What is it?' Nazu Mia asked eagerly.

'The crocodile's spleen,' said the Hakim, 'is well known as a specific against rheumatism and gout and also for general debility. Bring me the crocodile you have killed. I shall prepare for you a medicine which will make you feel twenty years younger.' The Hakim Sahib quoted some verses which might have been Arabic but were now in no recognizable language of the world. 'I can also use the liver. It is well known that crocodile liver increases strength and courage: it turns lily-livered poltroons into lion-hearted fighters.'

Nazu Mia looked uncomfortable. 'I wish you had told me before,' he said. 'I would then have brought the entire crocodile to you. I am an ignorant man—what do I know of the properties of a crocodile's liver or spleen? I knew the value of the skin and kept it. The children took a few teeth and claws as a memento. The rest of the carcase we threw into the river, and God alone knows where it is gone.'

The Hakim showed his disappointment. The disappointment was the keener because he had gone out of his way to please Nazu Mia—a thing he would not have done normally. It suddenly seemed to him presumptuous that Nazu Mia should sit on the *farash*. He had invited him to sit there only as a matter of form, but surely Nazu Mia should have known better! The Hakim felt he would like to snub Nazu Mia and tell him that his place was the uncovered platform used by rustics and plebians. Yet how could he do so? He had himself asked Nazu Mia to sit on the *farash*. He might take it amiss if the Hakim now asked him to move away. If it had been an ordinary man, the Hakim would not have cared, but would it be safe to affront a *Panchayat*? Who knew, some of these local *Panchayats* were so rude, Nazu Mia might even assault him.

'Well, if you have thrown away the carcase, it can't be helped,' said the Hakim. 'I however hope to get the spleen and liver from Asgar Mia. He said that he would try to kill me a crocodile this winter.'

Nazu Mia sensed the hostility in the Hakim's voice. 'If

MEN AND RIVERS

Asgar has promised you a crocodile, you might begin to prepare your specific,' he coldly said. The sneer in his voice was apparent.

The Hakim coughed. Suddenly, his eyes caught Nazu Mia's feet. They were hard and gnarled. Big peasants' feet that had seen hard life and never known any care. Suddenly it seemed to the Hakim that they were dirty. These unwashed feet had no place upon his *farash*. Inconsequently he said, 'Why don't you use shoes?'

Nazu Mia burst out laughing. In the midst of his guffaws, he managed to say, 'Shoes for a peasant like me? What has Allah given me feet for if I am to put them in shoes? Once in a moment of weakness I put on shoes. For seven days I had to limp. We peasants cannot live in cotton wool, Hakim Sahib!'

The laughter washed out the rancour that had been growing in Nazu Mia's heart, but his hearty laugh offended the Hakim still more. He felt that the laughter was an insult. Nazu Mia's large workman's hands and feet, his big peasant's figure and the long unkempt beard, and above all his loud hearty laugh all seemed an insult thrown at his emaciated and hungry attempts at respectability. In a voice in which the hostility was no longer concealed, he asked, 'Why don't you at least wash your feet when you are asked to sit on a gentleman's *farash*?'

Nazu Mia's laughter stopped. His eyes glittered at the insult. For a moment, the Hakim feared that the man might spring upon him. He shuffled in his seat uncomfortably. To ease the situation, he said, 'Shall I ask my man to bring a jug of water for you?'

The remark only served to infuriate Nazu Mia. With an effort he checked himself. In a voice that was cold and icy in scorn, he said, 'I am a peasant's son and don't know the manners of gentlemen. But we peasants never invite a man and then insult him in our house. Good bye.'

He drew himself up to his full height and strode out of the room. His frame seemed to fill the door and in a minute he was gone. Relieved of physical fear, the Hakim felt angry

and muttered in a half muffled voice, 'Unmannerly churl hair !' He called his servant and abused him. Why had he not removed the *farash* before Nazu Mia came in? He ordered him to take away the cloth and thoroughly dust it.

Nazu Mia strode out of the Hakim's room. All his pleasure and pride had been spoiled. He had gone to the Hakim feeling like a conquering hero but he came out with a bitter heart. He strode through the *hat* and paid hardly any attention to the people who accosted him. Men looked at one another and said, 'So proud and he has killed only a crocodile !' Another man said, 'Pride goes before a fall : so much pride is not good.'

Nazu Mia paid no attention to their remarks. He walked on till he came to his boat. Idris was sitting alone, puffing at his hookah. 'Where have you been so long, *Panchayat* ?' he asked.

'Must I give an account of my movements to you ?' snapped Nazu Mia.

Idris did not seem surprised at the sudden outburst. He knew his master. 'What is the matter, *Panchayat* ?' he asked. 'Are you not feeling well ?'

'You mind your business and I shall mind mine,' returned Nazu Mia.

Idris replied, 'That is why I am asking you *Panchayat*. While you were away, several *Kisans* came and asked for work. In your absence what could we do ? We told them to come again after a little while. They have not returned as yet.'

'Why didn't you engage them if they were suitable ?' said Nazu Mia irritably. 'Must you wait for me to do everything ? Why have I kept you all ?'

Idris did not reply. He knew that Nazu Mia was in a huff. It was useless to argue with him till it had blown over. After a little while Nazu Mia asked, 'Where is Ramzan ?'

Idris replied, 'Ramzan has gone for the marketing. *Ammajan* asked us to get some beads for her *Tasbih*. Malek Mia wanted a small *dao* for himself. And do you remember, *Panchayat*, that her gout is swelling again ? She asked us to get some liniment from the Hakim Sahib.'

MEN AND RIVERS

'Hakim Sahib, my foot,' blazed out Nazu Mia. 'What does that charlatan know of medicine? I shall thrash the man who talks to me of that infernal quack.'

Idris was now surprised. He knew that Nazu Mia had a liking for the Hakim. Even today, he had heard people say that Nazu Mia was sitting on the Hakim's *farash* and gossiping with him. Something must have happened between the two men, but he wisely refrained from asking any questions.

Nazu Mia also felt a little ashamed after his outburst. He had gone to the Hakim for his mother's medicine, but it had slipped him in talking about the crocodile. Afterwards the incidents had moved too fast. He kept quiet for a little while and then said, 'What does the Hakim know of gout? I shall get some medicine for her from the *Kabiraj* in the next village. If in the meantime we can kill another crocodile, we need not go to any Hakim or *Kabiraj*.'

In another corner of the *hat*, a small crowd had gathered round a Faqir. There was a large banyan tree with a hollow in the centre almost the size of a room. There the Faqir had built his den and sat in saffron robes. He wore a green turban to indicate that he was a *Saiyed*,—one who claimed descent from the holy Prophet himself. He sat on a small mat and silently told his beads on a *tasbeih*. A crowd of idlers—some young, some old, with a sprinkling of women among them—stood in a circle around his den. They nudged one another, and whispered in excitement. They wanted to ask the Faqir questions about their troubles and their future, but nobody dared to disturb him.

An old woman whose curiosity was stronger than her fear whispered, 'What after all have I to fear. I have lived more than three quarters of my life and will somehow drag out the remaining quarter. I shall ask him and see what he has to say.'

She came out of the silent circle and sat before the Faqir. The Faqir looked at her but she said nothing. Feeling bolder, she said, 'May I ask a question, reverend father?'

'Is it about your son you want to ask, my daughter?' replied the Faqir.

A thrill shot through the audience. How could the Faqir

MEN AND RIVERS

know that the old woman had turned almost crazy in thinking of her lost son ?

Mati's mother flung herself upon the ground. She clasped the Faqir's feet and cried, 'You know everything, holy father. Please tell me when Mati will return. Is he alive ? Is he well ? Shall I again see days of happiness before I die ?'

The Faqir smiled, 'How can I answer you if you fire questions so rapidly ?'

He closed his eyes and mused for a few moments. Mati's mother was full of torment and agony but dared not speak. The Faqir opened his eyes and said, 'I see your son, alive and well. He is going to marry and will soon come home with his wife.'

'When will he come ?' asked the old woman eagerly, but the Faqir had already turned to another man who was frantically trying to catch his eye. The old woman would not give up so easily and kept clamouring for a reply. The Faqir turned severely on her and said, 'Don't seek to know too much. Knowledge is the cause of misery. At times a glimpse of the future is vouchsafed to the holy man. Do not try to lift the veil higher than you can bear. Who am I to tell you of your son's fate ?'

The note of sternness in his tone awed the old woman. She slunk back in silence, uncertain whether the Faqir's words had made her happier or the reverse.

The Faqir addressed nobody in particular :

'My spiritual preceptor asked me to come and live here among you,' he said. 'I can perhaps do a little good, in any case I can try. Allah alone knows.'

The man who was trying to catch his eye now crept forward. He was a shrivelled little man, full of crinckles that made one doubt if his skin had ever been smooth and firm. A few straggling grey hairs still showed on his temple. He kept twitching his hands nervously.

'What is it you want, my brother ?' asked the Faqir.

The man began to blabber out his tale of woe. Life had dealt hardly with him. He had six stalwart sons and now they were all dead. His lands had been taken by others. He

MEN AND RIVERS

now led a miserable uncertain life. If the Faqir would give him medicine so that he could again have a son, his troubles would end.

A suppressed giggle shook the entire company. A young man, a little more venturesome than the others, asked, 'Have you got a wife that you want to have a son?'

The old man began to fumble and mutter again. His hands twitched more rapidly. 'Don't listen to these never-dowells, my father,' he said. 'Please give me the medicine I ask for and I shall take myself a new wife.'

'A new wife at your age?' scoffed the young sceptic. 'At your age, you ought to think of death rather than of brides.'

'You better hold your tongue,' said the old man viciously. 'I shall marry when and where I like. Any father would rather give his daughter to an old man like me than to a young rascal like you.'

He turned to the Faqir and said, 'Don't be misled by his remarks, holy father. After all, I am not as old as I look. I am only a little over fifty. Sorrow and hardship make me look twice my age. With your drugs, holy father, I shall look like a young Rustom.'

The crowd again tittered. A woman said, 'Yes, a little over fifty indeed! I am myself over fifty. When I was a little girl, you were already a full-grown man.'

The Faqir said, 'You can certainly grow younger, my brother, but it means hard work and costly medicine. Can you afford to have the medicine I shall recommend?'

The old man seemed to expand with pleasure. 'I shall do whatever you advise, holy father. I shall somehow or other secure the money. If I can't do it in any other way I shall sell the land I still possess. Youth is more precious than wealth. I would do anything to have a young son who will gladden my last days!'

The Faqir replied, 'If you are really serious, see me in the evening after the crowd is gone, I shall see what I can do to help you.'

The crowd grew divided in its attitude to the Faqir. The young men had been sceptical from the outset. They now

MEN AND RIVERS

became confirmed in their distrust. The older men looked at him with a new curiosity. After all, who would not like to regain the golden days of youth? There are legends of Faqirs who have discovered the elixir of life. Who could say this Faqir was not one of them?

The young men would have liked to heckle the Faqir and trip him up if possible. The presence of the older men acted as a brake. The obvious interest of the elders could not be ignored. Slowly the young men drifted away and left the field to older people. These also felt relieved, for now they could talk more freely of their troubles and hopes.

Soon the Faqir had established himself in the esteem of those present. Some women took from him amulets as a protection against the evil eye; some to win back the wandering affections of their husbands or lovers. Old men wanted charms to overpower enemies or cure errant sons of evil habits. For everybody the Faqir had a remedy, but he took care to add, 'It is your own faith that will bring about fulfilment of your desire. I am only a medium and can do nothing myself. Don't therefore blame me if you don't get what you want. It will only mean that you did not want it intensely enough.'

CHAPTER III

It was all over the bazaar that a Faqir with miraculous powers had come to the *hat*. He had herbs that would make the barren fruitful and the old young. Ramzan had finished his marketing and was looking about for Nazu Mia. The crowd near the Faqir's den attracted his notice and he sauntered to the place. He was physically a giant, but his wits were hardly in proportion to his strength. He gulped in everything that the Faqir said and believed every word of it. The Faqir noticed the giant and his wondering looks. It was evident that here was a likely subject.

'Why are you standing there?' the Faqir asked. 'Come near me and sit down, for I see great things awaiting you.'

The old man who had been conversing with the Faqir turned round and saw Ramzan. 'So you are here, Ramzan. Where is Nazu Mia? I hear he has killed a mighty crocodile?'

Ramzan made his way into the centre of the circle and sat down in front of the Faqir.

'I have been waiting for you, Ramzan Mia,' said the Faqir. 'I have great tidings for you and your master, Nazu Mia.'

Ramzan was overwhelmed. 'If I have your blessings, holy father, I have no fear for the future,' he said.

'Allah will protect you,' said the Faqir. 'You have seen better days, but now you are having some mental trouble. Don't be afraid. Soon they will be over, and you will win permanent peace and happiness.'

'Shall I call my master?' asked Ramzan eagerly. 'He is the most powerful man in this locality, and the most generous-hearted, though a little irascible.'

This was exactly what the Faqir wanted, but he would not show it. 'What is fated, will happen,' he said. 'Tell your master that I shall be glad if he comes. I see for him imminent danger but a glorious future if the danger is overcome.'

Again the audience felt a thrill. Here was the suggestion

of unknown danger and the operation of unseen agencies. Ramzan hurried to call his master. While he was away, the Faqir in a few deft questions gleaned from the audience as much as he wanted to know of Nazu Mia's life. This he did so skilfully that hardly anybody felt that the Faqir was trying to pump out information.

Ramzan hurried to the boat and found Nazu Mia raging at Idris. He badly wanted some farm hands to help bring in the harvest. The men had come to his boat while he was with the Hakim. In his absence, Idris had not dared to appoint them. Now it turned out that Asgar Mia, who also needed additional men, had already engaged them. It was bad enough to lose the men when he needed them. It was worse that he should lose them to Asgar. Surely, this was deliberate wickedness on Asgar's part, but he would get his own back.

Nazu Mia was shouting at Idris. 'Why have I kept the lot of you if I have to do everything myself?' he cried. 'Can't you even engage a few farm hands in my absence? And where is that tall fool I have brought with me?'

And Ramzan turned up. His appearance added fresh fuel to Nazu Mia's fury. 'Where have you been, Nawab Sahib?' he stormed. 'Did I bring you to gad about or to help me in my work? Where are the farm hands I must have to bring the harvest home?'

Ramzan blurted out, 'There is a Faqir here who can tell you all about your past and your future.'

Nazu Mia flared up. 'Have I kept you to go about nosing for charlatans and cheats?' he raged. 'Faqir indeed! As if a real Faqir has no other business but to cater to idiots and rogues like you!'

Ramzan persisted. 'Don't abuse a holy man, *Panchayat*. They know even your unuttered thoughts. They can hear you even if they are not here.'

Nazu Mia uttered a mighty oath and said, 'Allah has given you a buffalo's frame and a buffalo's wits. Will your Faqir secure me the farm hands the blackguard Asgar stole from me? If he can, well, I will pay him in silver. If he can't, what good is he to anybody?'

Ramzan responded eagerly, 'Surely he can, *Panchayat*. He has miraculous powers and can do what he wants. Come to him and he will tell you how to put a stop to Asgar Mia's machinations.'

By a curious coincidence, some of the men who had gone to Asgar Mia returned at this juncture. They had not agreed about the terms. Asgar Mia was not willing to submit to their extortionate demands. They were now anxious to find employment and Nazu Mia was anxious to employ them. This made the settlement of terms an easy affair, and Nazu Mia once more felt at peace with the world.

Ramzan had all a fool's obstinacy. He persisted, 'You must acknowledge the Faqir's power now. Did you not give up hopes of these men? Yet, you have got them on better terms than you could expect. The Faqir has expressed a desire to see you. As a gesture of his goodwill, he has done you this service. You must come and thank him for his good offices.'

Nazu Mia felt a little curious. After all, who knows what strange things there are under the skies? And he hadn't taken from the Hakim the medicine he wanted for his mother. Perhaps the Faqir would be able to give him the drugs he wanted. In any case, there could be no harm if he saw the Faqir.

The Faqir was waiting for Nazu Mia and greeted him warmly. To the crowd which still lingered, he said, 'I have something special to say to your *Panchayat* and I would like to speak to him alone.'

The crowd moved back and cleared a circle round the den, but would not disperse.

This mark of special honour removed the lingering doubts in Nazu Mia's mind. The Faqir was genuine and knew the proper worth of men. He had spotted Nazu Mia out of the rabble that collected in the *hat*. The special honour was a recognition of his special merit. If the Faqir could so quickly discover his value, he must be a man of real discernment. Nazu Mia had come in a sceptical mood, but his greeting was now warm and sincere.

'Sit down, *Panchayat*,' said the Faqir, and the *Panchayat* sat

down.

'I have heard about your wonderful powers, Faqir Sahib,' said Nazu Mia, 'and I want to beg of you a favour.'

The Faqir smiled. 'Never trust rumour, for rumour always exaggerates. For the grown-up children who crowd round me, one has to adopt childish tricks. The wise know that all outward show is mere pretence. Conquest of desire—that is the only good in life. When you have conquered the self, you are above sorrow and joy.'

Nazu Mia's faith in the Faqir grew. For one thing, it was nice to be told that one does not belong to the rabble. And the words of the Faqir sounded wise.

He said, 'You have seen into the secret of life, Faqir Sahib. You know the real value of things. We are worldly men, and we must attend to the little ills that trouble us every day. If you only will, Faqir Sahib, you can free me from my worries and anxieties.'

'Don't say so,' returned the Faqir. 'It is Allah alone who can deliver us from evil. All that we can do is to pray and invoke his blessings. It may be that sometimes he is moved by our prayer. But He decides, and He alone knows which prayer will be answered and which not.'

Nazu Mia was now convinced that the Faqir could really help him. He said, 'Please don't try to put me off with these excuses. All men know that Allah is the arbiter, but then, Allah loves his devotees. When holy men pray, their prayers have a special effect. You must pray for me, holy father.'

The Faqir said, 'You have many desires, Nazu Mia, and they worry you like serpents in the brain. You hate one who was once your friend, and Allah has commanded you to love your enemies. You are worried about your mother's illness, and Allah has said that he is the guardian of our lives. Who are we to worry? You are fearful of the future of your son, and Allah has proclaimed that he is the Lord of the past, the present and the future. Not a sparrow shall fall to the ground without His permission and knowledge. What prayer shall I offer for you, Nazu Mia, when you do not pray for freedom from desire?'

MEN AND RIVERS

Nazu Mia was overwhelmed. He clasped the Faqir's feet and said, 'Pray for me, holy father. I am a sinful man. There is anger and jealousy and hatred in my heart, but pray for me that I may overcome my sins. I am an ordinary man and I cannot bear to think of my mother and my son's suffering. Tell me, holy father, what will become of them.'

'Don't worry about them,' said the Faqir, 'for Allah will take care of them. Please leave me now, for I feel disturbed and want to be left alone.'

'But you sent for me,' said Nazu Mia in surprise.

'Yes, I sent for you,' he said, 'but I can't tell you now what I wanted to say. See me, again, if you will, after three or four days ; but please leave me now.'

Nazu Mia felt hurt. 'I will leave you since you desire it,' he said. 'Before I go, kindly give me some medicine for my mother. She suffers from gout, and her sufferings are terrible.'

'Leave me today and come after three or four days,' said the Faqir and closed his eyes to indicate that the audience was at an end. He seemed to sink into a trance. Baffled, Nazu Mia felt curiosity, awe and a tinge of anger, but was he disappointed ? It is hard to say. Nobody knows what turn the events might have taken, but now happened something for which none was prepared.

Nazu Mia made his obeisance before the Faqir, whose eyes were closed, and prepared to depart. Hardly had he come out of the den when he saw his rival and enemy Asgar Mia, striding out of the crowd that still stood around in a circle.

For a moment, the two men glared at one another, both tall and stalwart and with grey hair showing round their temples. The crowd hung breathlessly to see what would happen.

'So you have taken to necromancy to try to harm me ?' hissed Asgar Mia, 'Remember that Allah never helps evil doers.'

'You forget yourself,' said Nazu Mia. He was obviously struggling to control himself, but the hatred and anger in his mein and voice could not be concealed.

'What else were you doing with this Faqir all this time ? Isn't it a fact that your Ramzan has been telling everybody that your Faqir will perform rites that will kill me and mine ?'

retorted Asgar Mia.

'If you want to know what I have been doing with the Faqir, you better go and ask him,' said Nazu Mia. 'You shall hear nothing from me.'

'I certainly will,' said Asgar Mia and strode towards the den. Nazu Mia burst into a raucous laugh. The Faqir had treated him as an intimate, and had yet asked him to leave the den. Now he had fallen into a trance, and Asgar—of all persons Asgar—was going to wake him out of it! Surely the Faqir would be annoyed at such disturbance, and punish Asgar with terrible curses.

Asgar Mia looked at Nazu Mia with withering scorn, and advanced. Nazu Mia glared at his retreating back and laughed again in expectation of his discomfiture. His laughter stopped as suddenly as it had begun. To his surprise and wrath, the Faqir came out and greeted Asgar cordially. Together they entered inside the den.

Suspicion again flared up in Nazu Mia's heart. Without pausing to think what he was doing, he strode after them into the den. He would have hit them if he had dared, but his looks told what he did not speak.

The Faqir smiled at him pleasantly. 'Why have you come back, Nazu Mia?' he said, 'Is there anything else you want to ask?'

To Nazu Mia, it looked like a mocking smile. His anger flared up and he lost self-control. He forgot the respect and awe he had felt for the Faqir and began to shout at him.

'So this was why you sent me away?' he screamed. 'You think I am a child to be put off by nice words? You had pumped out of me what you wanted, and will now give me away to this scoundrel? Don't forget that I have come across charlatans before and know how to deal with them.'

Asgar Mia stood up in excitement but the Faqir placed a hand on his arm and prevented him.

To Nazu Mia he said, 'Why are you shouting, my brother?' 'What harm have I done to you?'

The quiet tone of the Faqir further enraged Nazu Mia. He began to shout his abuses still more loudly. The crowd

had till now hung back but now it came jostling into the den. Men took sides and angry voices were raised. It seemed that a riot could break out at any moment.

Suddenly, the voice of the Faqir rose above the den. He was reciting verses which the crowd did not understand. Men drew back lest they contain some evil charm. The din also subsided for a moment. The Faqir, who was now excited and in a frenzy, began to shout, 'Get back, get back, you fools, for on you is a great calamity, and yet you are fighting among yourselves. The river shall rise and land and water shall be one. For Nazu Mia, I see a stormy evening when the clouds gather and the waters boil. Your best friend will be your worst enemy and your worst enemy will be your best friend. Beware, beware when the wind is from the north-east and the cloudy eagle rises in the sky. Asgar and Nazu, Nazu and Asgar—what a strange pattern of love, and hatred and suffering Allah weaves with you !'

The Faqir crumpled up, and fell down in a swoon. Two disciples rushed out from some recess. Peremptorily they ordered the crowd out of the den. Overawed and full of forebodings, men looked at one another and stood petrified in their places. Again the disciples ordered them out and one by one, they slunk away.

CHAPTER IV

Nazu Mia was arguing with his mother. Ayesha was pressing him to stay at home. Since the incident in the Faqir's den, she was anxious lest some evil befall him. Nazu Mia had asked his men to keep silent and nobody uttered a word. She, however, sensed that something was wrong as soon as they came back from the *hat*. Ramzan and Idris carried out Nazu Mia's orders almost too well. Idris looked glummer than usual while Ramzan went about with an air of mystery which provoked questions. When Ayesha questioned them, Idris tried to put her off with excuses. Ramzan kept so significantly silent that her suspicions were further increased.

She cross-examined Nazu Mia who avoided a 'straight answer. Idris had something urgent to do as soon as she broached the subject. Ayesha was not to be baffled so easily. Ramzan was obviously the easiest target and next morning she sent for him.

'Why did you send for me, *Ammajan*?' he asked.

'You are trying to hide something from me, Ramzan. Now don't try to deny it. Your face has given you away.'

'Why should I hide anything from you? You are the mistress and it is for us to carry out your orders.'

'You say so? And yet since yesterday you are going about as if some one has set fire to your golden harvest. Don't evade my question but give a straight answer. What happened at Dhuldi to make you all so glum?'

'At Dhuldi? Why, nothing. We went and made our purchases, engaged the men and came away.'

'Where then is my medicine?' she fired suddenly.

'*Panchayat* went to get it from the Hakim, and I do not know why he hasn't brought it.'

'He really went to the Hakim? Why then did he not get the medicine? Did he quarrel with the Hakim?'

'Not with the Hakim,' said Ramzan and cursed himself for

his stupidity. Ayesha pounced upon his admission and asked, 'Then he quarrelled with somebody else?'

Ramzan kept silent. Ayesha waited for a few moments and burst out, 'You dare to disobey me, you tall idiot? Answer immediately or you shall have ashes instead of rice for your food.'

Ramzan pleaded, 'Please forgive me, *Ammajan*. The *Panchayat* told me to keep silent. He will whip the skin off my back if he learns that I disobeyed his orders.'

'And if you disobey mine, you think I shall prepare a wedding feast for you? Tell me what happened here and now. Otherwise I will have you hounded out of the village.'

Ramzan stood silent and hung his head. Ayesha stormed at him, 'You dare to disobey me? Your *Panchayat* still remembers the floggings I gave him. And you, a mere minion of his, hesitate to carry out my orders. Let your *Panchayat* return, I will see that he himself whips you out of the village'.

Ramzan made a wry face. 'What am I to do?' he said. 'If I disobey you, you will drive me out. If I disobey the *Panchayat*, he will flog me. In either case, I am undone.'

Ayesha reassured him, 'Tell me what happened, and no harm will come to you.'

She bullied Ramzan till he gave a full account of what had happened. Ayesha heard his story and said, 'So that's that. Asgar and Nazu are at one another's throats again.' She mused for a while and asked, 'Do you really think that the Faqir has spiritual powers?'

Ramzan felt relieved. His silence had been a great strain. Now that he could talk, he waxed eloquent about the powers of the Faqir. He reported what he had seen and heard, and drew upon his imagination to make the story more impressive. Ayesha heard him in silence and sent for Nazu Mia.

'What is this, I hear?' she asked. 'You have been quarrelling again with Asgar. Not content with that, you insulted a holy man. Is it true that he cursed you?'

'Who has been telling you these fairy-tales? Is it that tall idiot? I warned him not to scare you, but the fellow has let his tongue wag. Well, I will give him a thrashing that will

stop him blubbing in the future.'

'Who told you that I got the report from Ramzan? Have I not ears to hear and eyes to see? The whole village is buzzing with the stories of your doings.'

'But, *Ammajan*, how can you say that? Hardly anybody in the village has heard of the incident. It must be Ramzan, that tall idiot, who brought you all kinds of tales.'

'And if it is so, what of it? Haven't I a right to know what you are doing?'

'I don't mind mother, that he told you of the *golmal*. You certainly have a right to know, but that tall fool has no sense. He will repeat the most absurd stories.'

'All right my son, but why hide things from me? You mustn't scold Ramzan. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, trying to conceal things from your own mother?'

'It was only to save you from needless worry. Why do you take it so seriously, *Ammajan*? A charlatan has set up a trade in prophecies and charms. He can never be a real Faqir. His curses are mere words—wind that leaves no trace behind.'

'Your unruly temper has brought sorrow upon us all and yet you do not try to control it. Fraud or not, why quarrel with the Faqir? He did you no harm.'

'I admit, *Ammajan*, I was at fault. When I saw him greeting Asgar, the blood went to my head. I hardly knew what I said or did.'

'If you know your failing, why not guard against it? Don't you remember that it is your temper that has ruined your life?' Nazu Mia went pale. 'Don't put salt on a raw wound, *Ammajan*,' he pleaded, and without another word left the place.

Several days passed. Nazu Mia planned to cross the Padma and inspect some new sandbanks that showed above the water. They were still unclaimed and would become the property of the first settler. Nazu Mia wanted to have at least a share if he could not get the whole lot. Ayesha insisted that he should stay at home and send Ramzan and Idris.

'Listen to me, my son,' she said. 'There is no use in tempting fate. The Faqir cursed you and warned you against the

river. Yet you want to defy it for mere bravado ?'

'Who can fight against fate, *Ammajan*,' replied Nazu Mia. 'If it is fated that I shall die of drowning, I shall drown. I shall drown even if I never go beyond knee-deep water. And if Allah preserves me, what fear have I of the Padma ? Please don't try to stop me. The news has spread in all the villages. Who knows, perhaps people have already sailed across to claim the land.'

'If they have already sailed, why trouble to go now ?'

'Nobody knows how much land there is. I can get my share if I sail even now,' replied Nazu Mia.

'I am not asking you to give up the land, my son. Send Ramzan and Idris. Surely, you can trust them.'

'I have faith in their honesty, but not in their wit or presence of mind. Many men will put forward claims. Out of the contending claims, we must get the best we can. Ramzan will start a fight. The fellow doesn't understand that physical strength is not enough. And who will control him if I am not there ?'

'But, my son, I can't let you cross the raging Padma, and so soon after the Faqir's curse. If you must go, go to Dhuldi again and placate the holy man. If he blesses you, you can go. I shall not object.'

Nazu Mia made a wry face. 'And do you think, *Ammajan*, that the land will wait for me till I have the permission of the holy fraud?'

'Can't you show proper respect where it is due ?' snapped Ayesha. 'You may not have any regard for the Faqir, but I have. You should at least respect your mother.'

'I crave your forgiveness, *Ammajan*,' replied Nazu Mia. 'The fact is that if I wait till I have placated the Faqir, there will be no land left for me.'

'Which is more important, your life or the land ?' asked Ayesha.

'Why do you think that I am in imminent danger ?' said Nazu Mia. A note of irritation could be traced in his voice. 'After all, who is more powerful, Allah or a Faqir ? Can a thousand Faqirs change a jot of what Allah wills ?'

He added in a quieter tone, 'Don't be afraid, *Ammajan*. Autumn is almost at an end and winter is upon us. Don't you see that the Padma has lost her fury? New banks are already showing. The season of storms is over and the wild ducks have started to come.'

'One can never trust the Padma,' said the old woman. 'She is a witch, a witch that has swallowed hundreds of villages and men. She puts on an appearance of calm only to lure unwary boats.'

'You are imagining terrors where none exist,' said Nazu Mia. 'Please listen to me, *Ammajan*, and let me go. There is a nip in the air. The thin mist in the morning proclaims that winter is here. We will be careful and Allah willing, return in three days' time. Just think, your Malek will have more land and great wealth. Everybody will then honour him.'

Ramzan burst upon them and bawled, 'You are still here, *Panchayat* and Asgar Mia has already left to take possession of the new lands.'

Nazu Mia's body stiffened and his face grew dark. He turned to his mother and said, 'Will you still hesitate? Do you want that your son should be lowered in the public eye? Do you want that your Malek shall hang his head down before Asgar and his children?'

Ayesha was visibly disturbed but she controlled herself and retorted, 'Much you care for your son. I have grown tired of asking you to find a bride for him. You go about as if you are stone-deaf.'

'But mother, he is not even ten. Surely he is too young to marry?' protested Nazu Mia.

'Too young to marry, pooh,' said Ayesha. 'How old was your father when he married me? Do you want Malek to grow into an old man of eighty before you will think of a bride for him?'

'You needn't wait quite so long,' smiled Nazu Mia. 'But a marriage means money. I can't marry my son like a pauper and if Asgar takes all the land, where shall I find the money? Let us come to an understanding. I will go and settle these lands. We can have the marriage in *Falgun* next

year. A marriage will mean a lot of money. If I can secure these lands, we need not worry about the cost.'

'*Falgun* next year? That is too late. It is only autumn now. Next *Falgun* is more than a year away. If you can't arrange it this *Falgun*, let us have it in autumn next year.'

'Just as you please, *Ammajan*,' said Nazu Mia. 'You must not then object if I try to get some money quickly. These banks can make a lot of difference to Malek's future. In a few years, they will yield a harvest of gold.'

Ayesha agreed reluctantly and said, 'Go, if you must, but promise that on your return, you will go to Dhuldi and propitiate the Faqir. Better still, invite him here, and let us have him read the holy Qoran.'

'It's a splendid idea, *Ammajan*,' said Nazu Mia. He was delighted that he had got his mother to agree. He wanted to start before she could again change her mind.

Ayesha prepared for him a special feast that day. She cooked him a *hilsa* curry and fried him *hilsa* eggs. She made a dish of chicken in which the meat melted like butter in the mouth. Curds there were and thickened milk and *semai* cooked with home-made treacle. Nazu Mia praised her cooking. He had eaten in many homes but in all that locality, nobody could cook like his old mother, he said.

Early next morning, while the pale moon still shone in the sky, Nazu Mia started on his journey across the waters of the Padma.

CHAPTER V

A fortnight had passed since Nazu Mia's return from his journey across the river. Life moved as usual on the farm. The harvest was in and the new farm hands had departed. Winter had now definitely set in. A fine mist hung on the river and glistened in the morning sun. Wild birds called to one another across the waters.

Ayesha reminded Nazu Mia of his promise to invite the Faqir. Ramzan and Idris joined and he had no option but to agree. One afternoon he went to Dhuldi and approached the Faqir's den. He could hardly recognize the place. He had last seen a den built inside the hollow of a banyan tree. Now a new-built cottage surrounded the tree. The fresh cut bamboos looked clean and bright. The fences were festooned with green flags.

Inside the cottage, Nazu Mia found a dozen young men squatting on mats on the floor. A wooden bracket held a book before each. They were swaying as they chanted verses from the Holy Book. In one corner rose smoke from a brass platter as incense was burnt. The smoke, the smell of the incense and the monotonous drone of the verses made the atmosphere of the room heavy and mystic.

'Is Faqir Sahib in?' asked Nazu Mia. Nobody replied and he had to repeat his question in a louder voice. A door opened in one corner and a young man came out of an inner room. 'What do you want?' he asked.

'I want to see the Faqir Sahib. Will you please tell him that Nazu Mia of Rahimpur wants an audience.'

'You will have to wait. The Faqir Sahib is now in a trance and nobody dare disturb him till he wakes,' said the young man.

Nazu Mia was prepared to wait. He sat down in a corner and watched the young men chanting the verses. Soon, he could detect a rhythm in what they chanted. As his ears grew accustomed to the sound, he found that they were re-

peating the same verses again and again.

'What are you reading?' he asked.

The young man he addressed looked surprised. 'Don't you know the Quran?' he replied.

'I am an unlettered man, my brother,' replied Nazu Mia, 'and I rarely have the good fortune of listening to the Holy Writ. Will you please tell me what you are reading?'

'But you are listening to what we are reading,' returned the young man.

'Yes, I can hear what you are reading, but I cannot understand a word. Will you please tell me the meaning of the verses you are reading?' said Nazu Mia.

The young man looked his astonishment. 'The meaning of the verses? But we don't know the meaning. Aren't they the words of Allah? That is enough for us; we are committing the verses to memory.'

Nazu Mia was about to answer when the inner door opened again.

The young man, who had asked Nazu Mia to wait, came out.

'You are lucky,' he said. 'The Faqir Sahib has waked from his trance and has agreed to see you. You are lucky, for often his trances last for hours on end.'

Nazu Mia silently followed the young man. An inner apartment had been built inside the hollow of the tree. Here the Faqir received him. He was reclining on a cushion. More cushions were spread around the place. He offered Nazu Mia one, and enquired what had brought him to Dhuldi.

'I came to see you, Faqir Sahib,' replied Nazu Mia.

'To see me?' the Faqir looked surprised. 'But I thought that you had no use for charlatans and frauds.'

'Please forgive me,' entreated Nazu Mia. 'I am a simple peasant and prone to forget myself. Don't take it amiss if I said anything when I was out of my senses. I have repented since then my hasty words.'

'Why should I resent your words, my brother? Allah alone knows the false from the true. Often we do not ourselves know our real nature.'

MEN AND RIVERS

'I am ashamed of myself, holy father,' said Nazu Mia. 'Forgive me that I ever doubted a noble soul like you. You are a man of God and Allah asks us to be merciful.'

'You misunderstand me, brother, for Allah alone can pardon or condemn. I can tell you I have no rancour against you.'

'Will you then kindly accept my poor hospitality? Ours is a benighted village. Will you deign to come and stay with us for a couple of days? If you will explain to us the mysteries of the Holy Qoran, we shall always remain grateful to you.'

'I would love to, Nazu Mia,' said the Faqir, 'but how can I? People here won't let me go from Dhuldi. Besides, if I am away who will guide my disciples in their studies?'

'But you will be away for only a day or two, holy father,' protested Nazu Mia. 'Surely you won't disappoint us. It is rarely that a holy man visits these parts. We are so far away from the cities. Now that you have deigned to come, you must visit Rahimpur once.'

'If you insist, I must go, but let it be sometime next month.'

'Just as you please, holy father,' said Nazu Mia. 'But we would like you to come this month.'

Finally it was settled that the Faqir should visit Rahimpur next full moon. Nazu Mia returned home to report to his mother and make the necessary arrangements.

The nights were lengthening while the days became shorter and shorter. These winter days—they seemed to be over almost before one knew. Yet so much remained to be done. The autumn harvest was in, no doubt, but the land had to be prepared for the sowing in spring. Implements had to be mended and the cattle cared for.

Men returned from the fields while it was still light. After their evening meal, they would sit round the fire and smoke the hookah. This was the time when they exchanged views and compared notes, but it was not all idleness. The sugar-cane was brought in and crushed in wooden presses. Round and round the bullocks went and the juice collected in large earthen vats. Fires were lighted and large cans placed on them. In the glow

of the fire, men moved like dark shadows. In places there were bonfires. Children clustered round to watch the doings and listen to the tales.

Nazu Mia consulted his mother as to who should be invited. Ayesha said that he must invite every one in the village. It was an occasion when all enmities should be forgotten.

'But how can I invite Asgar Mia?' he complained.

'It is for him to decide whether he will come or not, but you must invite him all the same,' insisted Ayesha. Nazu Mia had to agree she was right.

Men were sent out with invitations. In some cases Nazu Mia had to go himself. For several days before the full moon, everybody in the house was busy. It was a big affair. Almost the whole village would come. Rice had to be husked and women were busy from early morning. Curds had to be set and arrangements made for the cooking. Some of the farm-hands busied themselves with fishing. Fishermen were given commissions for extra supplies. A calf was fattened against the day and a large assortment of fowls of all sizes collected. Cakes of different shapes and kinds were made. Some were of cocoanut milk and others of treacle and molasses.

At last the day arrived. Ayesha was up at dawn supervising the cooking for the special guests. Their food was prepared by the womenfolk while the general kitchen was managed by the men. In one corner sat the men cleansing the fowls and skinning the calf. Soon the meat was distributed among the different cooks. Large fish had been brought—*boal* for the ordinary folk and *rohu* for the Faqir and those who were to sit with him. One man piled banana leaves. There were not enough plates for all and the majority would have to eat from the broad banana leaf.

Malek felt mightily excited. 'What is it all about,' he asked.

'It is your wedding feast,' Ayesha replied in mock gravity. A peal of laughter from the women greeted her answer and Malek fled from the spot.

About midday the Faqir arrived. He came in a large

house-boat. A green flag on the mast indicated that a holy man was travelling. Today he was not dressed in his saffron robes. He had put on spotless trousers. A white shirt reached almost to his ankles. A black waist-coat with red embroidery added a touch of colour to his dress. On his head was the famous green turban. Round it showed glossy curls that had been freshly oiled and combed.

On the bank waited Nazu Mia and some of the village elders. As the boat drew nigh, there was a chorus of greeting from all sides. The Faqir stepped out of the boat first, Nazu Mia made his obeisance and welcomed him to Rahimpur.

As they moved towards the house, Asgar Mia suddenly came striding out of the village path. He greeted Nazu Mia coldly and turned towards the Faqir.

'Forgive me, holy father,' he said, 'that I cannot remain to benefit by your address. I am called away by a task that cannot wait. I must however pay my respects to you before I go.'

He made his obeisance and turned to Nazu Mia. 'Greetings,' he said and proudly strode away.

Nazu Mia stared at him but did not say a word. The Faqir was about to say something, but he looked at Nazu Mia and remained silent.

One outhouse had been specially prepared for his reception. Mats covered the whole floor and in one corner a white sheet was spread. Two vases, a rose-water sprinkler and one for keeping attar, stood on either side of a bowl of incense. The Faqir was led to the *farash*. Round him sat his disciples and some of the more important *Matabbars* while on the mat sat the ordinary folk. A canopy had been hung in front of the house for the overflow from the room. There sat a few stragglers and farm hands. After the greetings and felicitations were over, the Faqir began his recitation. In a deep sonorous bass he read and as he finished a verse it was taken up by his disciples in their thin shrill voice. Not a word was understood by anybody, but what did it matter? Were not these holy words full of wonderful power and efficacy?

After the recitations were over the Faqir began his exhortation. Now he used the dialect but it was studded with Ara-

bic and Persian words. Every now and then he broke into couplets of which the audience did not understand a word. He spoke of Allah and His might and the glories of the first days of creation. Then came the story of Satan's fall. Out of earthly clay Allah had created man and breathed into it his own light. He bade Satan salute the spirit of man but Satan refused, saying that he was created out of fire while *Adam* was of the earth. For that disobedience Satan was expelled from heaven and the other angels warned.

The Faqir's discourse moved steadily on. He spoke of *Adam* and *Howa*, the parents of all men. Tempted by Satan, they fell from grace. Then came the story of Abraham and his son Ismail whom he prepared to sacrifice at the bidding of the Lord. Through centuries the story rolled, in the experiences of Nuh and Musa and in the life of Isa who, however, did not die at the cross but was lifted up to wait for the glorious re-advent. In every age the word of God flamed anew—the one eternal message which circumstances and human ingenuity temporarily distorted but could never destroy. Then appeared finally the Prophet of Arabia. In the teachings of Muhammad the truth was more revealed—this time in a form that could no longer be distorted or corrupted. Is it not a fact that not a letter of the Qoran has changed in thirteen hundred years?

The Faqir stood up as he sang the praises of the Prophet. The whole company stood and joined in chorus. A medley of voices, some musical, some harsh, some old, some young, rose in a chant full of joy and assurance that the ultimate truth had been revealed to man.

The audience sat down and the Faqir began to recite the terrors of the last judgement. Seven suns would appear that day and the sky shine like a burnished copper plate. The earth would be scorched and there would be no trace of vegetation anywhere. Allah would sit on His judgement-seat and the generations since the beginning of time would appear before Him and beg for mercy. Here followed an interlude on the punishment of the sinner. The pious and the charitable would alone be saved from the wrath. There was a rich man who had given only one copper to a holy man during his whole life. He would

discover that his wealth had turned into scorpions that stung him mercilessly while the one copper coin stood above his head like an umbrella and protected him from the burning sun. On that day, the Prophets would all plead for their followers. Glory to the Prophet of Arabia, for he would secure protection for his disciples. Again the men stood up and there followed a paean of praise to the Prophet, the messenger of 'glad tidings and the beloved of Allah.

The audience sat down in hushed silence and the Faqir invoked on all present the blessings of Allah—earthly good and contentment in life and peace and beatitude after death.

The recitations were over but for some minutes the audience sat still. An old man got up and approached the Faqir and said, 'Bless this sinner, my father, and pray that my sins be forgiven.'

The Faqir placed a hand upon his head and said, 'Allah is merciful, my brother; what is it that ails you?'

The old man said that he suffered from dimmed vision, and the Faqir smiled.

'Allah has given you ripe old age, my brother. Why regret that you have lost the vision of your youth,' he said.

A man complained that his daughter suffered from the attentions of a spirit.

'Yes, a spirit!' he repeated. 'She is terrible to look at when the spirit is on her. She shrieks and throws herself upon the ground and kicks wildly on all sides. The shrieks cease and she begins to foam at the mouth. After a while her jaws get locked, the whole body becomes rigid and she goes into a deathly swoon. Sometimes the swoon lasts for days.'

'Are there any other symptoms?' asked the Faqir.

'No, my father. She is otherwise a buxom lass and has no other illness, and yet every day she grows paler and more emaciated.'

'I must look at her before I can be certain,' said the Faqir. 'It looks like a case of jinns, but one can never be sure.'

'Go home and fetch your daughter, Ibrahim,' said Nazu Mia. 'In the meantime, my mother and other women can pay their respects to the Faqir Sahib.'

MEN AND RIVERS

The Faqir was taken to an inner apartment. Ayesha came with a veil pulled over her face and paid her respects.

'Why be shy before me, mother?' said the Faqir. 'Look upon me as one of your sons.'

Ayesha dragged Malek before the Faqir and made him salute the holy man. 'Bless him, my father,' she said, 'he is my grandson and only hope in my old age.'

'Has he no mother?' asked the Faqir.

A twinge of pain shot through Ayesha's face. She controlled herself and said, 'No.'

The Faqir pulled Malek to him and made him sit on his lap. 'The holy Prophet was also an orphan but Allah was his protector. Allah will surely bless your grandson.'

Ayesha melted. 'I want to see him married before I die,' she said. 'But my son is continually putting me off.'

The Faqir smiled, 'All in good time, mother. He is rather young for marriage. Ain't he?'

'He will soon be ten,' said the old woman, 'and I have known men married at that age.'

'Times are changing and it is better that men should marry after they are mature. In the early days of Islam early marriage was unknown.'

'But we have always seen boys of nine and ten married. After all, parents and grand-parents must have some fun. What can be nicer than fondling a nice girl-bride?'

Ibrahim arrived with his daughter. She was a pale girl of fifteen or so with wide scared eyes. She was full-bosomed and her developed bust was the more noticeable on account of her lean frame. Her whole face seemed dead, except her eyes. In them was a lost, hunted look. She followed her father listlessly. Mechanically she saluted the Faqir and sat down on the ground in front of him.

'This is my hapless girl,' said Ibrahim.

The Faqir placed his hand upon her head and said gently, 'Don't be afraid, my child. What is it that ails you?'

The girl started at the Faqir's touch. In a monotonous tone she chanted: 'I am possessed of an evil spirit. He came to me when one evening I was bringing water from the river.'

I had to go through a clump of bamboos. Suddenly I saw him standing before me, dark and naked, and with eyes that burnt like blazing coal. I do not know how I reached home and what happened after, but my mother told me that I shrieked and swooned. Since then I see him whenever I am alone in the dark. He is so strong and naked; I am afraid of him.'

She had begun in a monotonous tone but as she related her story, her voice rose. A frenzy seemed to possess her. Her voice rose in a shrill crescendo till it became a shriek and she began to foam at the mouth.

'He is here, he is here and torturing me! Save me, save me from his clutches!' she shrieked and fluttered like a wounded animal. Soon her body became rigid and she lay in a death-like swoon.

The Faqir felt her pulse and looked into her eyes. The pupils were distended and rigid. The whites showed in a fixed stare. The pulse beats were irregular and thin.

'Bring a bowl of water,' said the Faqir, 'and some turmeric.'

A fire was lit and the turmeric burnt. A strong acrid smell rose in the air. The Faqir held the burnt turmeric under the girl's nostrils. Even in her swoon, she tried to move her nose away, but he held her fast and would not let her move. With his free hand, he whipped her with a short length of cord. The girl regained her consciousness and began to howl, 'Let me alone.'

The Faqir turned to the company and said, 'It is the evil spirit talking, but I will not let him off till he leaves the girl for good.' He continued beating the girl while the turmeric still burnt under her nostrils.

'Stop tormenting me,' said the girl.

'I have now got the spirit under control,' said the Faqir. He gave the turmeric to a woman and asked her to hold it to the girl's nose while another continued whipping her. Then he took the bowl of water and began reciting verses into it. Seven times seven he recited the verse and blew in the water, and began to sprinkle it on the girl's head and forced a few drops through her lips.

'Will you now leave her for good ?' he asked.

'I shall do anything you ask me,' answered the girl in an unnatural voice.

The whipping was intensified as the Faqir shouted at her, 'I will not let you off so easily. Now to show that you have left the girl, lift this pitcher with your teeth and carry it for seven steps.'

The girl did as she was bid, but her movements were uncertain and lifeless. She took up the pitcher with her teeth, tottered seven steps and dropped down in a deadly swoon. The pitcher was smashed. She lay in the pool of water, an inert and pathetic figure.

'Allah be praised,' said the Faqir. He assured Ibrahim that the ghost would trouble his daughter no more. The audience gazed in admiration. Their reverence for the Faqir knew no bounds. He drew Ibrahim aside for a minute and said, 'Marry your daughter off as soon as you can, for she now needs a husband's protection.'

He spoke to Ayesha and assured her about her son. 'Allah is merciful and will bless you and yours,' he said. 'Your house will be full of harvest, gold, and the laughter of happy children.'

They feasted till late at night, and the village praised Nazu Mia's munificence. There had been no such feast within living memory.

CHAPTER VI

It was the end of *Baisakh*. The hot sun burnt in a copper sky. Not a wisp of cloud broke the flood of light that poured down like molten copper. The earth looked parched and thirsty. The grass was burnt and the leaves on the trees hung withered and brown. There was not a breath of wind. The whole atmosphere was heavy with tropical heat.

The Padma lay still in the haze of light. She had lost her autumnal splendour and looked emaciated and hungry. Sand banks showed here and there. The banks in the distance gleamed in the sunlight. The brilliance on the river was dazzling. A steel sky looked down upon the steel surface of the water. Heat and light radiated in cruel abundance.

It was only nine in the morning, but the blazing light beat down upon the earth with relentless power. Not an animal or bird moved. Even the leaves seemed afraid to stir. A blazing curtain of silence and heat had enveloped the earth and sky.

Nazu Mia came out of his room and staggered in the light. He put his hand to his eyes and cursed. 'I had no idea it was so hot outside. It is like a blazing furnace.'

'I told you so, *Panchayat*,' said Ramzan, 'but you would not believe me. Twice twenty years I have lived, but don't remember a summer like this.'

'That's your fancy,' replied Nazu Mia. 'Every year we think that there has never been a summer like this.'

'No, *Panchayat*,' said Idris who had just joined the group, 'there is something special about this summer. Not only is it hot, but there is hardly a breath of wind. I don't like it at all.'

'Why, what is wrong?' said Nazu Mia. 'It is all to the good that we have not had those terrible storms. Last year throughout *Baisakh*, it stormed every afternoon. Our work was almost at a standstill. Allah be praised that this year we have no such trouble.'

'No, *Panchayat*,' gravely replied Idris. 'It would be much better if we had the storms. We could then be sure that the season of storms is over. This year, there have been no storms

so far, nor is there any sign of approaching rains.'

'You are a pessimist,' Nazu Mia lightly laughed. 'It is about the end of *Baisakh* and soon the rains will start. Haven't you noticed that the waters of the Padma are coming up?'

'Let's hope for the best,' said Idris. 'I have heard from my father that about 20 years ago, there were no storms in *Baisakh*, and not a fleck of cloud in the sky. Then came a mighty storm and floods that swept the entire countryside.'

'What is fated, will happen. Why worry about it?' said Nazu Mia and turned to Ramzan. 'Is the boat ready?' he asked.

'Do you want to go out?' asked Idris.

'You are becoming more and more forgetful every day,' snapped Nazu Mia. 'Don't you remember that today is the tenth day of the moon. We must go and collect the rent in time for payment of our revenue. The *Dewan* is coming to Dhuldi at the full moon. Unless we can clear our dues, we might lose our lands.'

'You want to cross the Padma today? Won't it be better to pay the *Dewan's* dues from some other source and wait till the rains are definitely in?'

'What for?' said Nazu Mia.

'You know what people say. Padma in *Baisakh* is a hungry Padma, an angry Padma. Why tempt her, *Panchayet*?'

'You talk like an old woman, Idris,' remarked Nazu Mia. 'Padma in *Baisakh* is hungry, and Padma in the rains is angry, and Padma in the autumn is treacherous—must men keep indoors all the year? Have men stopped sailing on the Padma for such childish fears? It is a clear day, and it is yet quite early. Even if the wind rises, *Baisakh* storms never start before the evening. We shall be safely across the river before then. It shouldn't take us more than a couple of hours to row across, if we go with the current.'

Ayesha came out. 'What are you wrangling about?' she asked.

Nazu Mia cast an angry look at Idris and replied, 'I was asking Idris and Ramzan to get the boat ready. I must go and collect the rent from the newly settled lands.'

'What, cross the Padma in this stormy weather?' exclaimed Ayesha.

'Stormy weather, *Ammajan*? Why, there is not a fleck of cloud. As for the wind, there is hardly the whisper of a breath,' protested Nazu Mia.

'Don't try to be clever,' Ayesha snapped. 'Don't you know that *Baisakh* still mornings are followed by stormy afternoons?'

'Not always, *Ammajan*,' said Nazu Mia, 'and even if it be so, we shall be safely across long before evening. We want to start immediately.'

Ayesha argued and expostulated, but Nazu Mia was adamant. He pleaded with her, and finally said, 'Life will be impossible if one has to live in continual fear like this. After all, men must fight the elements in order to live, and we have fought the Padma all our lives. We know her moods, *Ammajan*. There is nothing to fear today.'

'I also know her moods,' grumbled Ayesha, 'and that is why I am terrified. Today she is tense like a tiger about to spring upon its prey.'

Malek came running up. 'I want to go with you, father,' he cried, but Ayesha snatched him to her and stonily said, 'You haven't yet grown old enough to be disobedient. You shall not leave me today.'

Nazu Mia smiled. 'Can you say I am a disobedient son, *Ammajan*? But let Malek stay with you, and amuse you. Allah willing, I shall be back tomorrow for my midday meal.'

The boat sailed. The glare of the sun was terrible. The scorching light poured upon the sandy bank. The sand threw the heat back on the faces of the men. On the Padma, a thin mist showed—a haze of light that concealed everything in dazzling obscurity.

'Shall we try to put up a sail?' asked Ramzan.

'You may try, but there is hardly any wind,' replied Basir, the old helmsman. 'Ply hard your oars. I shall be thankful when we cross the Padma today.'

'Why, are you also nervous?' asked Nazu Mia.

'I am not nervous, *Panchayat*,' said the old man, 'but I don't like the look of the river. She looks too quiet and tense. I

only hope she remains so till we have crossed the main channel.'

In the meantime, Idris and Ramzan had put up the mast and spread the sails, but they hung limp and lifeless.

'There is hardly a breath of wind,' said Ramzan as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

'I told you so,' grimly replied Basir, and added, 'don't start wiping your brows already, but set to it. A stalwart like you shouldn't shirk a little honest work. Pull, my brothers, pull for all you are worth.'

Idris said, 'Let us have a smoke first, and then we shall make the boat fly. You won't mind a smoke, will you, *Panchayat* ?'

Nazu Mia smiled and watched Idris as he prepared the hookah. He poured the water out of the hurdygurdy, and filled it with fresh water from the river. 'Phoo', he said, 'even the river water is warm and tasteless. There is no pleasure in work on days like today.'

Ramzan was pulling at the oar. He had tied his towel like a turban on his head, but his upper body was bare and showed fine beads of perspiration. They gleamed in the sunlight as the muscles played under his glossy skin.

The boat was now nearing midstream. So long, a bend in the bank had protected it from the full force of the current, but now a quickness was perceptible in the water. The boat quivered in the stress, and Basir shouted to Idris, 'Put your hookah away and take to the oars. New water has started coming down, and the current here is keen as a blade.'

Idris reluctantly put by the hookah and took the oar. '*Badar, badar*' they shouted in unison as the current struck the boat. For a moment, the boat stood still. Then she veered sharply round as the current forced her out of her course. The hungry waters lapped at her sides, and the pleasant sound of running water rose to a sharp hiss.

'Beware, beware!' shouted Basir, as Ramzan tried to pull against the current. 'Take it easy and give the boat her head. It does not matter if we are taken a little downstream.' Then he turned to Idris and said, 'Take off the mast and the sails.'

Lighten the boat and let us put our trust in Allah.'

The men followed his instructions. For some minutes there was no other sound but the lapping of the oars and the hiss of the current. The men sweated at the oars till it seemed that they had been drenched in a shower. Basir plied the helm not only for steering the boat but also for propelling her along.

'Another hour, and we shall be out of danger,' said Basir as he wiped his streaming face.

'May I have a smoke now?' asked Ramzan.

Basir snorted, 'This is no time even to think of death, and the Nawab Sahib is thinking of his smoke!'

Idris laughed and said, 'You have yet to know our boatman, Ramzan. Otherwise you wouldn't ask questions.'

A sudden gust struck the boat.

'Allah be praised,' said Ramzan, 'that there is at last a breath of wind.'

Idris wiped his forehead and said, 'It is like a breath from a furnace. There is no comfort in such hot wind.'

Basir looked grave. 'Let us hope that it is nothing more. But you can never tell. In these *Baisakh* months, a small wind soon becomes a raging storm, and then Allah help us. We are now in the middle of the river.'

Nazu Mia came out on the deck. 'What is this I hear about a wind?' he asked.

'It is nothing,' said Idris. 'Just a whiff of wind that is not enough to cool our burning brows.'

Soon it became obvious that Idris was wrong. The wind rose, and the gust became a strong headwind that swept across the river from the north-east. The surface of the river changed to a shield full of dents that caught the sun and threw back the light. Gradually the water became choppy and the boat began to roll.

Basir anxiously scanned the sky. In the east showed a black spot about the size of a man's fist.

Gulls arose almost from nowhere and began to circle in the sky. Their shrill cry was drowned in the gathering roar of the storm. The wind grew stronger till it was shrieking through the sky. The waters of the Padma began to swell and

MEN AND RIVERS

rise. Wildly she tossed her waves and they beat upon the boat with a muffled roar. The dark spot on the sky rapidly grew till it looked like a huge eagle spreading its wings over the world. The sun hid in a blaze of colour behind the clouds and was soon blotted out. The Padma looked dark and sinister in the failing light. The wind howled like a spirit in torment and the river echoed back the unearthly screams.

'*Badar, badar*' cried the men in the boat, but the roar of the wind and the scream of the river drowned their voice.

'Shall we turn back?' asked Idris. He had to shout in order to make himself heard. 'It is useless to turn back,' shouted Nazu Mia. 'We are more than half way across and it would be better to go on.'

Basir nodded assent, but muttered to himself, 'I only pray to Allah that we may be able to do so.'

The men fought against the storm and did their best. A sombre gloom had descended upon the water. The blinding flashes of lightning hardly relieved the gloom. The thunder boomed and reverberated through the sky and was answered by the deep muffled roar of the Padma. The waves lashed at the boat and the spray shot up hungrily. The long line of waves was flecked with foam that glittered like the teeth of a beast of prey. Beneath the shrieks of the storm and the scream of the waves swelled the steady roar of the hungry waters.

'The wind has veered,' shouted Nazu Mia, 'it is now from the south-east.'

'We can't get across now,' Basir shouted back.

Ramzan bawled through the storm, 'Why not put up the sails and let the wind carry us where it will?'

'And face sure death?' snapped Basir.

'Keep her steady and face the storm,' called out Nazu Mia. The boat faced due south-east, but the wind was beating upon her, and she would hardly answer to the helm. Suddenly, a gust swept her round, and the helm was torn away from the boat. With the helm went Basir who was clinging to it for all he was worth.

'Now we are undone,' wailed Ramzan.

'Stop blubbing,' roared Nazu Mia. 'If we are to die, let

us die like men.'

Fearfully they waited in the boat. Without the helm, it was little that they could do. Nazu Mia also took an oar, and the three men pulled with all their weight. They tried to keep the boat straight in the teeth of the storm.

But now, the river was swelling dangerously. 'The waves were splashing over the sides, and rolling the boat about like a piece of cork.

'Don't let go your oars,' shouted Nazu Mia, 'even if the boat is lost, we may have a chance of floating to the bank.'

As if to mock his words, the winds rose in a howl and a flash of lightning shot out like a hungry tongue. The boat lurched, lifted itself with an effort and went down the trough of a mighty wave. The wave suddenly broke and on all sides rose a wall of cruel, snarling waters.

The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Perhaps it lasted an hour—perhaps less. Even after the storm was over, the Padma rolled in long swinging waves. A few clouds still hung in the east and the sun went down in a blaze of glory.

PART II

The news of Nazu Mia's death came like a bolt from the blue. By a strange trick of fate, the storm had bypassed Dhuldi. Throughout the day, the sun shone brightly there, and hardly a leaf stirred. Late at night, some fishermen who had been caught on the fringe of the storm, returned. Their bodies were weary and their hearts heavy. In one of the boats lay the senseless form of Basir. He was the only survivor of the storm.

Ayesha could hardly believe the news and rushed to the riverside. 'Return my son to me, oh witch,' she wailed, and the waters, placid after the fury of the storm, gurgled in sympathy.

'Stop your mockery,' shouted the distraught woman and tried to fling herself into the water. Her women held her back and placed Malek in her arms.

Ayesha hugged the boy and burst into a frenzy of weeping. 'Darling, oh my darling,' she wept, 'your father did not live even to get a bride for you. Who will now look after you and protect you from the ills of life? Who will bring you a red jacket from the *hat*? And buy you the first mangoes and sweetest melons? Ebb tide and flow tide will come and go, but your father will never return!'

Bitterly she wailed and wept, for her heart was broken. She had lost her husband in early youth and had placed all her hopes upon her son. Nor had he disappointed her. However imperious he was to the outside world, to her he remained a patient and obedient son. Now the centre of her life was shattered and she remembered with agony the occasions when she had been harsh to him.

Suddenly she recalled the curse of the Faqir of Dhuldi. Bitterness swelled up in her heart. For a moment she almost forgot her anguish.

'Cursed be the day when the Faqir came to Dhuldi and cursed my son,' she wailed. 'Cursed be his stony heart. He came and cheated us with empty words, but his curse remained!'

People came to sympathize with her. Listlessly she listened to their words. What consolation could there be for a heart that was seared as by lightning? She sat stonily for most of the time and muttered to herself. Often she seemed utterly oblivious to what was happening all around.

Asgar Mia came one afternoon and stood silently before her. He was anxious to spare her pain and did not know what to say. She stared at him but her eyes were unseeing. Suddenly she got up and walked away. Asgar Mia waited for a few minutes, but when she did not return, he also walked away with bowed head.

Only in the evenings did she wake from her listlessness. She clasped Malek in her arms and went to the riverside.

'Morning changes into night and all men return to their homes, but your father will never come again,' she said again and again till Malek began to cry. She fiercely hugged him to her breast and stared into the darkening river.

Malek suffered, more for her suffering than out of any feeling in his heart. He missed his father, his firm voice and affectionate care, but after all, what does a child of ten understand of death? His life flows onward, his vitality is too great to be overwhelmed by any grief. The challenge of the future is in his blood. How can he continually brood over the past?

Malek was troubled by the change he saw in his grandmother. She was there, living and yet dead, awake and yet so frozen and still that it was worse than death. Round her he hovered and sorrowed in her sorrow. She also seemed to wake out of her torpor only when he drew near. Of him and him alone she seemed conscious; to the rest of the world she was inert, dead.

Life on the farm went on mechanically. It was like a great machine whose engine had stopped but the wheels continued to move out of sheer inertia. Men came to Ayesha for orders but she looked at them with a dead stare that made them uncomfortable.

She lived in this way for seven days. Only seven days, but they were like seven days and nights out of eternity. Her

greying hair had turned white overnight. Round her eyes were circles of agony. 'Allah save her from her misery,' murmured Kulsum.

The old woman sat in her corner and muttered to herself. Malek came and pleaded with her. He was hungry and it was his grandmother who always fed him. Mechanically she rose and brought him his food. As he ate, she told him stories of his father's childhood. He also was naughty like Malek. She tried to smile but it was a wan and lifeless grin that only distorted her face.

Malek slept with her in her bed. Suddenly at night he woke up. The bed was empty.

'Granny, granny,' he whispered but there was no reply. He felt angry, miserable and afraid. His voice rose in a shrill scream as he cried, 'Granny, granny, where are you?' Still there was no answer.

Malek was now thoroughly frightened. The darkness was tense and seemed alive. The dim wick which flickered in one corner only made the darkness more tangible. Strange shapes the uncertain light made—dark silhouettes that were gradually lost in the solid wall of darkness behind.

'Granny, granny,' screamed Malek in mortal terror. Someone on the floor stirred uneasily in sleep. This only increased the child's terror. He wanted to leap out of the bed but fear held him in thrall. In wide-eyed anguish, he screamed at the top of his voice, 'Granny! Granny! Where are you?'

The sleeper on the floor started and sat up. A dark shape rose and approached the bed. In fear and expectancy, the child stared at it. The shape materialized. It was Kulsum. The child gave a sigh of relief.

'Why are you weeping, Malek?' asked the maid.

Terror had made Malek almost forget why he wept. Now his anguish overwhelmed him once more. 'Where is my granny?' he asked.

Kulsum consoled him, 'She may have gone out for a minute and will soon return.' But Malek would not be consoled.

'I am afraid,' he wailed.

Kulsum pulled up the wick and brightened the lamp. It was still dim and could hardly light the room. The darkness became a little less solid but the shadows cast were sharper and more fantastic.

'You are a man, Malek, and men are not afraid,' said Kulsum, but Malek nestled against her and kept quiet.

Some minutes passed and there was still no sign of Ayesha.

'What's happened to *Ammajan*?' said Kulsum to herself. There was a trace of anxiety and annoyance in her voice.

Malek was waiting for a sign from her. At her words, he burst into a storm of weeping, 'Oh granny, my granny, where are you?'

Kulsum herself was a little frightened now. 'You are a big lad, Malek. Must you whimper like a baby?' she asked him irritably.

She tried to put him to bed, but he clung to her and would not let her go.

'What can one do with a child like this?' she grumbled. 'All right, if you must hang to me, come along.'

She took up the earthen lamp and came to the door. It opened at her touch, for someone had undone the bolt. A flood of light swept in and made the lamp look wan and pale. Overhead the moon rode the sky and filled the earth and heaven with cool radiance. The moon was almost full. In her white cold light, trees and hovels stood sharply defined.

Kulsum roused the other maid. Together they went to the outhouse where Basir, the old helmsman, was sleeping on a mat.

'Get up, Basir *chacha*,' called Kulsum. He was a heavy sleeper and it was some time before he could awake. He got up and sat on his bed and sleepily rubbed his eyes.

'What is the matter?' he growled, annoyed at being disturbed.

In a few words Kulsum told him that Ayesha was not to be found. Basir sprang up. His drowsiness dropped from him. They searched the inner and the outer houses and all around, but no trace of Ayesha was to be found. Malek again began to whimper. Slowly they went towards the river bank.

MEN AND RIVERS

There, by the waterside where Nazu Mia kept his boats moored,
lay Ayesha with her face pressed to the wet mud.

Basir gently touched her.

'She is dead,' he said in a sad grave voice.

CHAPTER I

Malek was playing in the courtyard of the house. It had lost its former prosperous look. A house without a master is like a widow in rags. Hardly six months had passed since Nazu Mia and Ayesha's death. Already the roofs looked ragged and the courtyard was full of dust.

Kulsum came out of the room where she was working. 'You are still out in the sun,' she said in a voice that had a trace of annoyance in it.

'It is not hot at all,' said Malek and tossed his head. His curls shook and he smiled at Kulsum from the corner of his eyes.

'No, it is not hot at all,' mimicked Kulsum. 'But if you fall ill, mind you don't trouble me.'

'Do I cause you trouble?' asked the boy. He looked the picture of innocence.

Kulsum burst out laughing. 'Just listen to the boy,' she cried to Gulabi who came running out. She was much older than Kulsum and looked gnarled and sour.

'Why are you giggling?' she asked. She could not see the joke, and Kulsum would not explain.

'Stop your silly cackle,' snapped Gulabi. 'What is the matter? Have you found a lover, that you are so gay?'

Kulsum blushed, for she was still of an age when she might easily have a lover.

'You are thinking of lovers all day long,' she protested laughingly. 'That is why you can never open your lips without talking of lovers.'

'And you never think of one, my frigid nun,' retorted Gulabi.

Kulsum kept smiling and Malek came up to her. 'Why are you smiling, Kulsum?' he asked, and nestled to her.

'Even Malek prefers you,' taunted Gulabi.

'Why not?' retorted Kulsum and snatched Malek to her and walked into the room.

Malek could stand a little endearment but too much of hugging was not to his taste. He freed himself from Kulsum's

embrace and ran back to the courtyard.

In one corner he had poured some water on the dust and was kneading the clay. Small sticks lay on all sides. If asked what he was doing, he would gravely say, 'I am building a house.'

Basir came in. He was now Malek's guardian. Kulsum and Gulabi looked after the house and Basir tended the fields. The two women could no more manage the house than the old man manage the fields. They felt the weight of their burden. The only person who lived carefree and unaware was the child.

For almost a month after Ayesha's death, he had sorrowed for her. During the day he was mostly busy. Games which children invent kept his mind and heart engaged. In the midst of his play, he would rush back to the house and look for his grandmother. When he did not find her, he would suddenly go grave. But the mood of sorrow did not last very long, and soon he was at his games.

In the evenings it was otherwise. Ayesha had fed him and put him to bed and told him stories till he dropped to sleep. If at night he awoke, she was always there to look after him. He missed her love and care and brooded on his loss. He would not eat though Kulsum pressed. He would cry as if his heart would break, till he wept himself to sleep.

The edge of his sorrow slowly wore off. After some time he became almost as fond of Kulsum as he had once been of his grandmother. And Kulsum took to him as if he was her own son. She was a buxom girl of twenty odd years. Married when she was about fifteen, she had lost her husband within a year. Since then she lived in Nazu Mia's house. Though many pressed for her hand, she had till now refused all suitors.

Basir had his own sense of humour. He would say, 'Here is this young lad, and who looks after him? An old man who has seen three score years and has one foot in the grave. A young lass for whom the lads are waiting eagerly and will whisk her off some day before one can wink. And a sour old maid who thinks of nothing but her bed and her afternoon nap.'

MEN AND RIVERS

Gulabi would snort and say, 'An old man with one foot in the grave, and yet frisky and senseless like a sparrow !'

Between the three, Malek had on the whole a pleasant time, for they vied with one another in trying to win his love.

Basir one day brought him a bow and a quiver of arrows. The bow was made of the best bamboo and polished so that no sharp edges hurt the hand. The arrows were made of the stalks of jute.

Malek's glee was infectious. He sauntered forth to display his new-found wealth. An envious crowd of children collected in his wake.

A little girl clapped her hands and cried, 'Can you shoot that kite on the banyan tree ?'

Malek was not sure, but would not show it. 'Sure,' he cried, 'I can shoot it down but don't want to.'

A naughty urchin, Sabu, shouted, 'Don't want to or can't ?'

Malek pretended that he hadn't heard him and gravely walked on. The crowd of children were divided in their loyalty. Some said that he could but would not shoot the bird, while Sabu and his friends held that the bow was hardly worth having.

Malek was inordinately proud of his bow. He imagined himself a hero and said, 'I am Ali, the lion of Allah and I shall fight you all single-handed.'

The boys took him at his word and attacked him in a group. It began in play but Sabu was smarting with jealousy and made it a serious affair. Poor Malek could hardly cope with them. He shot his arrow, but they were mostly wide by yards. Even those which hit the mark dropped down harmlessly.

'But if you are hit, you must fall down,' protested Malek.

In reply Sabu took hold of an arrow and snapped it across his knee.

'Why have you broken my arrow ?' shouted Malek and jumped on him. Sabu was ready for the fray. Soon the mock fight became a real one. Poor Malek lost most of his arrows. Sabu caught hold of the bow and tried to drag it out of Malek's grasp. The tug of war was unusual, for the lion of Allah was small and his enemy did not show him

proper respect.

Suddenly the bow snapped. Malek wildly flung himself on his opponent and tore his hair and bit him in a frenzy of rage. The fury of the attack took Sabu by surprise. Others came to his help and Malek was flung on the ground. Ding-dong the dog-fight went. Soon the boys forgot about friend or foe, and fought only for the joy of battle.

Dusty and ragged but happy after the fight, the boys shook themselves free and appraised one another.

'You fight well,' said Sabu grudgingly.

'You are not bad either,' returned Malek. His glance fell on his broken bow. Tears welled up in his eyes and he said in a choking voice, 'Why did you break my bow?'

Sabu smiled sheepishly and shifted uneasily from one foot to another. 'I didn't want to. It got broken in the fight.'

Malek could hardly contain his tears and yet he wouldn't cry before his rival. He tried to put on a brave face and smiled. 'Well, I don't mind,' he said, 'I shall make another bow and get strong arrows that are real.'

The boys looked at him in admiring envy. The bow was a beauty and he took its destruction so casually!

Basir was seen hurrying to the spot. With him ran the little girl that had asked Malek to shoot the kite. The fight had frightened her and she had rushed off to call Basir.

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' scolded Basir and caught Sabu by the scuff of his neck. 'You are a big lad—well over twelve and yet you fight a little boy like Malek?'

'But Malek started the fight,' protested Sabu. There was no spirit in his voice, which sounded faint and timid.

'No,' shouted the little girl and her voice rose in excitement. 'Malek wanted to play but Sabu broke his arrow and his bow. It was only then Malek attacked him.'

'You mind your own business,' cried Sabu and glowered at her.

'Don't you try to terrorize her,' warned Basir and lifted her up in his arms. 'Now, little mother, what is your name?'

'I am Nuru,' she said and looked full of wonder that anybody should not know *her* name.

MEN AND RIVERS

'Nuru ? It is a pretty name, my dear. Have I seen you before ? I don't think I have.'

'But we have been here only a short time. How could you see me before ? My father brought us home last month.'

'And whose little daughter are you ?'

'Don't you know my father ?' she replied. She could hardly believe him and looked at him with big open eyes.

'Nuru is Asgar Mia's daughter,' said Sabu. He felt pleased that Basir's attention had shifted from him.

'So you are Asgar Mia's daughter ? We didn't know he had a daughter,' remarked Basir, and added, more to himself than to the children, 'We didn't even know that he was married.'

'Yes, he is,' eagerly replied Sabu. 'I have seen Asgar Mia's wife and she is beautiful. She is more beautiful than anybody else in the village.'

'Strange,' muttered Basir, 'that Asgar Mia should have a wife—a pretty one—and yet we shouldn't even hear of it. He is one of the quiet deep ones, and can keep his counsel to himself.'

He turned to Malek. 'Are you hurt, my dear ?' he asked.

'No, Basir *Chacha*,' Malek said. And added in a shy eager voice, 'Will you please make me another bow, and real arrows ? I will be very careful and won't break them again.'

'All right, my child,' said Basir and lifted him on his shoulder and walked away.

CHAPTER II

'Malek,' shouted Kulsum, 'where are you?'

A peal of laughter from above greeted her. She craned her neck and found the boy perched on top of a tree.

'Are you in your senses,' cried Kulsum, 'trying to climb a plum tree? Don't you know it is full of thorns?'

Another burst of laughter greeted her remark and along with it came a ripe plum aimed at her nose.

'Come down and I will teach you. Pelting me with plums, you little ungrateful wretch,' Kulsum shouted at him, but in her voice there was more amusement than anger.

The reply was another shower of plums, mostly half ripe, though a few were red and luscious.

Kulsum calmly put a few in her mouth and said, 'Do just as you please, my dear. Stay up there like a monkey for all I care. I am going home and won't wait another minute for you.'

She collected her pots and pans and plates. She had come to the river bank to scrub them clean. The sand was handy for burnishing the brass to gold. Malek had accompanied her. While she worked, he had slipped away and climbed the plum tree that stood near the landing stage.

Kulsum slowly got up and elaborately prepared to go. She arranged the pots and pans according to size, putting the smaller ones inside the larger ones. She filled her pitchers and held them against her hips while the pots and pans were balanced on her head.

'Shabash,' cried Malek from his tree and clapped his hands.

Kulsum refused to take further notice of Malek. She climbed the steps of the ghat and started homeward. Malek felt beaten and didn't quite know what to do. Suddenly, a thought struck him and he smiled mischievously. He raced down the tree and ran after Kulsum. On reaching her, he caught hold of her knees and clung to them.

'Go home, if you can,' he defied her and began to laugh.

Both Kulsum's hands were engaged, for they circled the pitchers

resting against her hips while on her head was the pile of plates and pots and pans.

'Now be a dear and let me go,' she pleaded and put on her smile.

'Why did you threaten me?' asked Malek imperiously.

'I admit my guilt, but forgive me, my dear,' said Kulsum.

'Promise me you won't do it again,' demanded Malek.

'I promise,' laughed Kulsum.

'Say it thrice,' gravely insisted the boy.

'All right, I won't, I won't, I won't.' She laughed and said 'Now let me go.'

Malek let go his hold and began to trot home by her side.

Sabu was waiting for him in the courtyard. 'Where have you been so long?' he shouted impatiently as soon as Malek came into view.

Malek ran up and asked, 'What's the matter?'

Sabu took him by the hand and said, 'Come.'

'Where?' asked Malek.

'Come and I shall tell you,' said Sabu mysteriously and began to tug at his hand.

Malek was intrigued. 'I am off,' he shouted to Kulsum and dashed after Sabu.

Kulsum shouted back, 'Where are you off again? Wait till you have . . .' But Malek had already disappeared.

'What is one to do with a child like that?' she grumbled. 'He is continually on the move and keeps one on tenterhooks.'

Gulabi put her head out of the kitchen. 'What are you grumbling about, young beauty?'

Kulsum laughed in spite of her anger. 'You have a tongue and some cheek.'

'Forget about my tongue and cheek, and answer my question,' retorted Gulabi.

'Well, I was saying that Malek is like quicksilver. He can't keep quiet for a moment.'

'What, quarrelling with your child bridegroom again? I am telling you, Kulsum, take a lover soon or you will grow potty.'

'How can I till you have first taken one?' laughed Kulsum.

'You are my guardian angel, and I must follow you.'

'Don't be greedy and yet shy, my dear. It will only keep you hungry and do nobody else any good,' retorted Gulabi.

'That's what I am saying to you, sister dear,' replied Kulsum and let off peals of laughter.

'Stop your cackle and do some work,' grumbled Gulabi and vanished inside the kitchen.

Kulsum followed with a smiling face.

Sabu did not let go Malek's hand till they were clear of the house. There was a large mango tree which bifurcated a little above the ground and made a fine seat for the children. Thither Sabu led Malek and detailed to him their plans.

'We have got hold of a boat,' he whispered excitedly, though no one was near and there was hardly any need to whisper. He paused to give Malek an opportunity of fully realizing the implication of what he said.

'Yes,' said Malek and waited.

'We will go rowing on the river and we can also bathe. Can you swim?' he shot the question at Malek.

'Of course,' replied Malek superiorly.

'Well then, let us go. The others are waiting near the ghat and if we delay too long, they may start without us,' said Sabu.

'Whose boat is it?' asked Malek.

'Who knows and who cares?' replied Sabu in scorn. 'Nobody is now in the ghat. The women are busy cooking and the men have left for the *hat*. We shall have a fine time.'

'But supposing the owner turns up?' Malek hesitated.

'That's why we must hurry,' Sabu showed his impatience. 'Once we are off, we defy him to catch us. It's the only small boat in the ghat. The others are huge hulks that would need at least six to move.'

'My father always said that I must not take other men's boats. The boat we have in *our* ghat is too big for us.' Malek's eyes grew dim as he suddenly remembered his father.

'You are a booby,' said Sabu. 'Fathers say many things, but do they themselves act as they say? I am sure your father also took other people's boats when he was young.'

'My father would never do such a thing,' Malek said testily. He was feeling sad but didn't want to let Sabu know.

'Much you know about your father,' snapped Sabu.

Malek flared up. 'If you say another word about my father, I shall never speak to you again.'

His heart was heavy, and he felt that if he didn't pretend to be angry, he would probably burst into tears.

Sabu was genuinely surprised. 'But, Malek, I never said a word against your father, and I didn't want to—why should I? He was such a good man, so tall and strong, and once he gave me sugar-candy to eat.'

This was more than Malek could bear. He broke down and fled in tears.

Sabu was amazed. For some moments, he stared at the retreating figure and then dashed after it. He caught up with him and placed his arm on Malek's shoulder.

'Why are you weeping?' he asked.

'But I am not weeping,' snorted Malek through his sobs. 'Who says I am weeping?' he dashed off the tears with his arm and glared angrily at Sabu.

Sabu was perplexed. He could not understand it at all. Why should Malek get angry when he had said or done nothing to give offence? And why should he suddenly run away?

Sabu remembered with a start about the boat. He had been so amazed that it had gone clean out of his mind. He shook himself up and said, 'Will you come with us to boat or not, Malek? I can't wait for you any more.'

Malek was torn between his desire to go and the memory of his father's command. Would his father—now dead—be really angry if he went? But, if he did not go, the others would. He would no longer be the hero he was in their eyes.

He looked sullenly at Sabu and kept silent.

'Hurry up and decide,' Sabu egged him on.

'Let's go to the ghat,' said Malek without committing himself. As soon as he said it, he felt relieved, for the decision was postponed. He could now go to the river-bank with a clean conscience. His father had only asked him not to ride in other men's boats. He had never asked Malek to keep

MEN AND RIVERS

away from the river.

Sabu looked at him dubiously but said nothing. He started walking to the ghat and Malek followed him in silence.

A peal of shrill laughter broke the silence. The boys started to look in the direction of the sound.

'O, it's Nuru,' said Sabu indifferently.

'Yes, it is Nuru,' mocked the little maid and again burst out laughing. Malek was amused. 'Why are you laughing?' he asked.

'But why shouldn't I?' she mocked and laughed still more.

'Girls are silly,' gravely remarked Sabu and continued at a sedate pace towards the river.

Malek looked at Nuru from the corner of his eye. Sabu's remark seemed to leave her wholly untouched.

'And boys are brutes,' she said after she had finished her round of laughter.

'Why do you say that?' asked Malek in an injured tone.

'But why shouldn't I?' she retorted and laughed again.

'How did you manage to come? Don't you have to cross a canal?' asked Malek, who wanted to change the subject.

'But the canal is dry,' said Nuru in surprise. 'Don't you know even that?'

'He knows nothing,' Sabu gravely said.

'And you know everything?' retorted Nuru before Malek could speak.

Malek was annoyed and yet felt grateful. He turned angrily to Sabu and said, 'You say anything about me again, and I will teach you.'

Sabu ignored his wrath. 'Don't get angry for nothing,' he said and turned to Nuru. 'Will you come with us?'

'Where?' she asked in surprise.

'We have got a boat,' unconsciously Sabu lowered his voice, 'and we want to go rowing on the river. We shall bathe by the new bank that has formed this year.'

'But if there are crocodiles?' asked Nuru. She was practical.

'Who cares about crocodiles?' snorted Sabu contemptuously.

Malek was growing restive. He was not yet sure if he

would go. He wanted to and yet did not when he remembered his father's words. He could not stand the idea that Sabu should have the pleasure of the bathe and all the glory. He burst out breathlessly, 'I once killed a crocodile.'

'You kill a crocodile!' grunted Sabu in disbelief. 'You dare not go rowing with us and you say you killed a crocodile! The idea!' He snorted in contempt.

'Much you know about what I dare,' Malek flared up. The boys worsted for a fight, but Nuru intervened.

'Don't keep on shouting at one another,' she said. 'I don't like boys fighting all the time.'

'That is because you can't fight yourself,' cut in Sabu, but she ignored the interruption and said, 'You tell me, Malek, about your crocodile.'

She turned to Sabu and smiled sweetly; 'And then I shall hear the story of *your* exploits.'

Malek was elated. He began, 'It was about a year ago in autumn last year, that I killed the crocodile.'

'But you didn't kill it,' shrilly interrupted Sabu. 'I know.'

Nuru cast an angry look at him. Malek conceded, 'I didn't exactly kill it myself, but I laid the line, and I hooked it. I wanted to stick it myself, but my father would not let me—he speared it.'

Sabu cut in, 'There is a great deal of difference between hooking a crocodile and killing it.'

'All right, Sabu. You are a great hero,' Nuru coolly said. 'But here we are at the ghat. Which is your boat?'

There was no need for a reply. A shout greeted them from the only small boat which was there. About half a dozen urchins were there, of all sizes and ages from seven to ten, and they had obviously made a day of it. They were wet to the bone, and their scanty clothing was dripping with water. Some were on the boat while others hung to its sides with their legs trailing in the water. They splashed water on all sides and pushed one another off the boat. Some of the more daring were not content with splashing water. They dived into the river and brought up slime and flung it in merriment. Locks were bespattered with mud and faces had a coat of

slime on them, but the dirtier they grew, the greater seemed their glee.

'Come along, Sabu,' they shouted, while one, more practical than the rest, sped a handful of mud at Malek. He missed his target, but he had not thrown in vain. The next moment Sabu flung himself into the fray with one side of his face covered with mud.

The boy who had thrown the mud dived and down went Sabu after him. They chased one another under the water and soon a head appeared on the other side of the boat. He caught hold of the boat and hauled himself up. As Sabu came up to the surface, a peal of laughter greeted him. Undiscomfitted, Sabu tossed his head and shook the water from his hair and began to sport like a dolphin. A couple of boys leapt from the boat and raced to him. Soon they were all splashing in the water.

Malek stood on the bank and watched them play. He also longed to go in, but hesitated as he thought of the reception he would get from Kulsum. Nuru was standing by his side.

'Don't you want to join them?' he asked.

'No,' she replied with a toss of her curls. Her tone was quite definite.

'Why?' asked Malek. He felt curious that she should not show any desire to join in the game.

'I do not like this rough and tumble,' she said, 'and mother asked me never to bathe in the river except with her.'

Suddenly Sabu noticed Malek on the bank. He began to shout:

'No crocodiles in the river

Come and bathe till you shiver.'

The boys took up the chorus and shouted lustily. They swam about and splashed and made sufficient din for fifty men.

Sabu shouted at Malek, 'Are you afraid to come in, you great crocodile-killer?'

The taunt was more than Malek could stand. He began to tighten his clothes, but Nuru clutched at his hand.

'Don't go,' she pleaded.

'But if I don't, Sabu will always laugh at me.'

'What does it matter?' argued Nuru, but Malek would not be stopped. He leaped into the water and raced towards Sabu. 'Come along,' he cried. 'Let us see who can swim further,' and struck out boldly.

Sabu followed him and they raced silently for a couple of minutes.

'How far do you want to go?' gasped Sabu. He was feeling a little frightened, for he had never come out so far. They were now about fifty yards from the bank and began to feel the strength of the current.

'How far?' replied Malek doggedly. 'As far as you dare to go.'

Sabu swam for a few yards more, but the current was now carrying them downstream. Thoroughly frightened, he cried, 'You may do as you like but I am returning to the bank,' and he swung round and made for the shore.

Malek shouted back, 'So you see now who is afraid?' and started to drift down the stream.

'Come back' shouted Sabu.

'But I am coming back,' replied Malek and allowed the stream to carry him towards the bank. Soon he overtook Sabu and together they swam in silence. In a few minutes they came to the shallow bed where the current was slow and torpid. Some of the other boys swam out to meet them while the timid wallowed in waist deep water. They danced about and sang:

'No crocodiles in the river

Come and bathe till you shiver.'

'You are a daredevil,' grudgingly admitted Sabu. Malek said nothing but his elation was obvious. He had once more become the hero of the day.

Silently he waddled to the shore. Nuru came rushing up. 'Why did you go so far? I was so frightened,' she said.

'But there is nothing to fear,' Malek assured her.

'Suppose a crocodile had got you,' argued Nuru.

'It would have made no difference. My father and granny both are dead,' he said.

'If you are so rash again, I shall not talk to you,' said Nuru and her eyes were brimful of tears.

CHAPTER III

Basir returned from the *hat* grave and silent. Malek dashed out to meet him, but when he looked at his face, he suddenly stopped and stood silent.

'What is it, Malek?' asked Basir.

'Nothing,' replied the boy and silently followed him.

As they drew near the house, Kulsum heard their footsteps and came out.

She saw Malek and frowned. 'So you have already been to Basir *chacha*. I tell you, *chacha*, I will have nothing to do with Malek if he goes on in this way.'

'Why, what is his latest escapade?' asked Basir as he smiled in spite of his anxious mood.

'Just ask him,' replied Kulsum grimly.

Malek shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other but would not say a word.

'Why, why have you suddenly gone dumb?' mocked Kulsum.

Malek still remained silent. Basir looked from the one to the other and smiled.

'You are almost as bad as Malek,' he said to Kulsum. 'Why not tell me yourself since you are bursting to do so?'

Kulsum stared at him. Amazement showed in all her face. 'That is fine, Basir *chacha*,' at last she said. 'I am bursting to report against your darling? Is that your idea? Well, I have nothing more to say. I tell you, I wash my hands of Malek and his pranks.'

Basir burst into a loud laugh. 'You will never grow up, Kulsum,' he said. 'Quarrelling with a mere chit like Malek?'

'Yes, I always quarrel with Malek. I don't look after him. It is on my account that he is getting naughtier and naughtier every day,' she said in one breath and entered the kitchen with resounding steps.

Kulsum could be heard in the kitchen. She was still grumbling, but her words were indistinct.

Basir pulled Malek to him. 'Now tell me, you urchin, what

did you do today to make Kulsum so angry ?'

Malek bowed his head. It was clear that he felt guilty. He bit his nails and hesitated.

'Come, come,' Basir encouraged him. 'I won't eat you up.'

'I went with Kulsum to the ghat this morning,' said Malek and fumbled. He dragged the words—they seemed forced from him unwillingly.

'Yes, and then ?' Basir prompted him.

The words came out even more slowly than before, and in a voice that was hardly audible. 'I pelted her,' reluctantly spoke Malek.

'What ? Pelted her ?' asked Basir. His voice was sharp and angry. 'Pelted her with stones ?' he repeated, half incredulously.

'No, not with stones,' Malek hastened to add and stopped.

'With what, if not with stones ?' asked Basir impatiently.

'With plums,' said the penitent sinner.

'With plums ?' Basir could hardly restrain a smile, but he forced a grave look on his face, and asked, 'Yes, and then ?'

'I went to the river bank with Sabu,' said Malek obstinately.

'Now, now, I can't spend the whole evening listening to you. You have done what you have done. Out with it, and be a man,' said Basir impatiently.

Kulsum came and cut in, 'Your precious charge comes home dripping, with water pouring from his hair and his clothes drenched. I asked what was the matter. You have just had a sample of his replies. After much cross-examination, this is what I learnt. He went to the river with Sabu. They stole somebody's boat and had a high time. Just fancy a little chit like that daring to face Padma's current. It doesn't even need a crocodile to swallow him—*raghav boal* could do the trick.'

Kulsum finished in a spurt and gasped for breath. As soon as she regained her breath, she added, 'And you ask me to look after an imp like that !'

Basir looked grave. 'You are now growing up, Malek. Soon you will be ten. Though others may remain children at ten, you can't. You must remember you are Nazu Mia's son.'

Your father was the most respected man in our land and you must grow up so that you can one day take his place. What would your father say, if he were alive today? Now run off and don't fret.'

It was late in the same night. Malek had finished his meal and been sent to bed. Kulsum spread a mat on the floor and served Basir with dinner. On a large brass platter was steaming rice, and on a smaller one fried brinjals and mashed potatoes. A fish curry and boiled pulses comprised the menu and a bowl of milk to round off the meal. Basir looked at the meal appreciatively as he sat to dinner and said, 'You are a wonder, Kulsum.'

Kulsum poured him a glass of water from the pitcher in the corner. She was going away when Basir said, 'Sit down Kulsum, I want to talk to you.'

Kulsum was obviously surprised and hesitated. After a moment's pause she said, 'Let me call Gulabi; perhaps she will be of help too.'

Basir burst out laughing and said, 'Call her and welcome, but Kulsum, I am old enough to be your father. You needn't be shy before me. Haven't I seen you as a tiny tot without a single rag on you?'

Kulsum blushed 'You are impossible. Who says I am shy? You want to talk to me and I thought you might also like to tell Gulabi. Three heads are better than two.'

'All right, my dear,' said Basir, 'Gulabi is old and sour and not a romantic little fool like you.'

Kulsum grimaced but said nothing and went out to call Gulabi. After a few moments, the two women returned and squatted on the floor before Basir.

'Now, what is the precious matter?' asked Gulabi.

'Don't be frisky. It doesn't suit you at your age,' said Basir slyly. He knew that reference to her age always enraged Gulabi.

Gulabi was going to retort, but Basir put up his hand. His manner changed and his voice was grave.

'After *Panchayat's* death,' he said, 'You know that we somehow paid the revenues to keep the land. *Ammajan's* ornaments

were sold. You too gave away your trinkets. Well, since then, I have been trying to get the rent from the tenants. Twice I have crossed the Padma, once in the heavy rains when the river was full, and again in autumn before the water began to go down. Twice have they turned me off on some pretext or other. I went again last week. The current is slow and there is no fear of storms, but you know how cold it is in the river these winter mornings. The cold wind seemed to pierce through my skin. I shivered in my boat till the sun rose through a sea of mist and brought back a little warmth to the world. Again I returned empty handed. The tenants were profuse in their apologies but did not pay their rent. I threatened and stormed and at last they said that they would pay me in the *hat* when I met them. Today, they told me that their crop had failed and they could not pay—I was free to do as I liked.'

'What did you say?' asked Kulsum.

'There was nothing for me to say. I had said all I could and they had given their answer.'

'Why didn't you go and report to the *Dewan's* clerk?' asked Kulsum.

Gulabi snorted. 'A fat lot of good that would do,' she said contemptuously.

Basir looked at her with admiring eyes. 'How did you know?' he said, 'for that is exactly what I did, and do you know what the fellow said?'

He mimicked the piping voice of the clerk and said, 'What have I got to do with your quarrels? I want my revenue in proper time. So long as I get my rent, you may go on fighting like cats for all I care.'

'I protested and said that the owner was an orphan, a minor and that is why the tenants were trying to cheat him. The scoundrel coolly said that if a minor couldn't keep the land, why not let it go to abler hands? The fellow had the cheek to suggest that he would transfer the land to me if I paid him a handsome bribe.'

'And you have decided to accept his offer,' Gulabi sarcastically said.

Kulsum protested. 'You have lost your wit, or you would never say such a thing to Basir *chacha*.'

'The hussy is off on her high horse,' Gulabi's voice was caustic.

'Now, now,' said Basir, 'I called you two so that we may put our heads together and find some way out. Instead you start nagging one another.'

'If you ask me,' said Gulabi, 'the best thing is to sell the land. Malek is a child and you are old. You can't possibly manage so much land. Even if you try, you will find all the tenants fooling you, like today. But if you have the money, well, Malek can buy again if he wants to.'

Basir snorted in disdain. 'You are a woman and a woman will never grow sensible. What, sell the land? Aren't you a peasant's daughter? And does a peasant ever part with land willingly?'

Gulabi coldly said, 'I am a peasant's daughter and know exactly what is what. That is why I ask you to sell the land. But I forget that men are sentimental fools. The older they grow, the more sentimental they become.'

Kulsum interposed. 'You are always hard on Basir *chacha*,' she said, 'but there is a lot of sense in what you say. Still, I don't think it would do to sell the land.'

'Here is Solomon's granny herself, the way she talks,' remarked Gulabi caustically. 'But will you kindly say why it won't do to sell the land?'

'My reason is simple,' replied Kulsum, ignoring the sarcasm. 'Suppose you sell the land and get a lot of money. What will you do with it? Once it gets known that there is money in the house, and how can you prevent its being known, who will stop robbers from raiding the house and robbing us of the money? What do you say, Basir *Chacha*?'

'You are right, Kulsum,' said Basir. 'I had no idea that there was so much sense in your young head.'

'For once you are right,' admitted Gulabi and added, in a mocking tone, 'Be careful Kulsum, lest the old man should propose to you before you know where you stand.'

Kulsum blushed but Basir was furious. 'Stop your silly

jokes, old woman,' he cried. 'You are getting more and more irritating every day, with your stupid and inapt remarks. Can't you for once be serious when a serious matter is being discussed?'

Gulabi looked unperturbed. 'Why do you get so excited over a joke unless there be something in your mind? You know the question, "Who is in the temple?" and the reply, "I am not eating bananas." Men are incorrigible.'

Basir retorted, 'It is useless trying to argue with a woman and I won't. But what does it all come to?'

Gulabi said, 'Nothing. We are exactly where we were before. You can't collect the rent, and yet won't sell the land, and I admit there is something in what Kulsum says. It wouldn't do to keep the money in the house nor can we deposit it with the *Mahajan*, for then we shall never see it again. What then can we do?'

'That is exactly what I would like to know,' said Basir.

The women looked at one another. 'Now shake that pretty head of yours and see if anything drops out,' taunted Gulabi.

'You are old, and age means wisdom,' returned Kulsum and added mischievously, 'generally.'

Basir said, 'I have thought of a plan, but it means taking a great deal of risk. Still, if there is no other way out, we may try it.'

'You always have a plan, but the point is, is it any good? Out with it,' laughed Gulabi.

Basir hesitated and then slowly said, 'As things are now, we can't hope to get much out of the lands. Even if we sell them, we don't know what to do with the money.'

'We all know that,' impatiently said Gulabi.

'Well, I was wondering whether it would do if we referred the matter to the *Panchayat*,' said Basir.

'Isn't Asgar Mia the *Panchayat*?' sharply interrupted Gulabi.

'Yes, he is the *Panchayat*, but he can't decide anything entirely on his own. The *matabbars* will meet and discuss, and come to a decision.'

'Tell that to your grandmother,' retorted Gulabi. 'Why mince matters? There may be other *matabbars*, but isn't it

a fact that everything is decided as the *Panchayat* wants ?'

Basir had to admit that what Gulabi said was true.

'Now that Nazu Mia is dead, do you want to give the land to Asgar Mia ? Give it to Asgar Mia who was Nazu Mia's bitterest enemy ?' said Gulabi scornfully.

Kulsum said nothing but looked reproachfully at Basir. She could hardly believe her ears. To think of giving the land to Asgar Mia and placing Malek under his thumb ! Was it foolishness or worse ?

Basir felt the unspoken suspicion in their minds. 'Women are small-minded,' he flared up. 'Fancy, distrusting me ! If I wanted to cheat Malek, could two puling women stop me ? Kulsum, I thought you at least had better sense. I see it is useless discussing anything with you. I have to look after Malek's interest and I shall do as I think best.' He rose stormily and started to go.

'You may be angry with us, but what offence has your food given to you ? At least finish your meal, before you go,' said Gulabi. Her voice was disconcertingly quiet.

Kulsum also pleaded with him. 'Who dreams of distrusting you ? You are Malek's guardian, and we only do as you bid. But we must tell you what we feel. Is it safe to put Asgar Mia in control ? Suppose he refuses to disgorge what he once secures ?'

Basir was still in a huff. He grumbled, 'If you understand these things better, why don't you manage affairs yourselves ?'

'That is why you should not get angry with us,' Kulsum smiled disarmingly. 'You can do without us, but we can't do without you.'

'Nothing can beat a woman for suspiciousness and lack of trust,' muttered Basir.

Kulsum looked at Gulabi and smiled. 'You have put him in a rage and now he will listen to us no more. But I ask you, Basir *Chacha*, why do you consult us at all if you won't allow us to say what we think ? You can do anything you like and we needn't know at all.'

'Well, what is your suggestion ?' queried Basir. 'What

else can we do to keep Malek's inheritance ?'

'How can we tell you what to do ?' said Kulsum. 'We only ask, if you hand over the lands to Asgar Mia, have you no fear that he may swallow them ?'

'He certainly may,' said Basir. 'But I think he will not. He has a reputation for honesty and wouldn't like to lose it. This would be an acid test. People will keep a sharp eye on him. Besides, I have another hope. You know he has no son, and his little daughter Nuru has taken to Malek like a kitten to its mother. Who knows, one day they might marry. Asgar Mia might himself think on these lines.'

'You are incorrigible,' Kulsum smiled in spite of herself. 'To think of a marriage between Nazu Mia's son and Asgar Mia's daughter ! Don't you know how they hated one another ?'

'And you don't know how friendly they were before they quarrelled,' said Basir triumphantly. 'Like two flowers on one stalk,' and he smiled significantly.

CHAPTER IV

It was late in the afternoon. Basir sat in the courtyard pulling at his hookah. Two days had passed since the discussion with the women but he could not yet bring himself to go to Asgar Mia. He had no doubt argued in favour of such a course. His arguments were meant as much to convince himself as the others. He could not really decide what to do. It sometimes seemed to him that the friendship of Nuru and Malek was an indication of what Fate had in store for them. If they married, all would be well. Surely Asgar Mia would not cheat his own son-in-law and daughter. Nuru was his only daughter. He was not yet too old to have another child, but she would perhaps remain his favourite in any case. Fathers have a weakness for their daughters, specially if they happen to be their firstborn. A smile flickered on Basir's face as he remembered his feeling for his own firstborn. His pleasure was however tinged with sadness, for where was she now? He was alone in the world—as forlorn as Malek—and yet Malek was young and he was old. He puffed at his hookah and found it had gone out. He thought he would put some more tobacco in the bowl. He was too lazy to get up and continued puffing at the dead hookah.

Doubts assailed his mind and he felt how foolish he was. Why should Asgar Mia permit a marriage between his daughter and Malek, the son of his rival and bitterest enemy? If Nazu Mia had been alive, things might have been different. The marriage of the children would be a kind of political alliance. Did not cases happen every day where fathers quarrelled and finally made up by patching a marriage between their children? But Nazu Mia was dead and Malek had hardly any prospects. He would almost certainly be poor and might be worse. Why should Asgar Mia, now undisputed leader of the area, accept a pauper as his son-in-law?

No, the decision was too difficult, and poor Basir could do nothing but put it off from day to day. And yet, delay was dangerous. Nazu Mia's tenants had refused payment of

rent. Unless steps were taken soon, there was little hope they would ever pay. They might even approach the *Dewan* and have the lands settled in their names. Something had to be done and soon.

With the resolution, the desire to smoke came back with redoubled strength. Why should he not smoke when he wanted to? It was foolish to wish for a thing and not take it. He got up and put some more tobacco in the bowl and lighted it afresh. As the rich smoke came gurgling from the hookah he sighed in contentment. A feeling of repose possessed his mind and he sank into a reverie in which thoughts were no longer sharp or definite.

Kulsum burst upon his reverie. 'Where is Malek?' she asked in breathless haste.

For a moment Basir did not comprehend. He stared at her and almost hated her. He was quite happy, musing over the past and suddenly this woman bounces in and shatters his world of dreams. Even as these thoughts found shape in his mind, he realized the meaning of her question and leapt to his feet. 'Malek?' he repeated, 'where is Malek?'

Kulsum glowered at him. 'That is precisely what I want to know,' she said.

Basir was now fully alert. 'When did you see him last?' he asked.

'I was feeling tired,' she wailed, 'and lay down for an afternoon nap. I asked Malek to rest a little but the imp didn't want to. I dragged him to bed but still he wouldn't sleep. Finally, I smacked him and he kept quiet till I thought he had fallen sleep. I dropped into sleep myself, and when I woke, I found he had fled. Since then I have seen no sign of him.'

Basir burst out laughing. 'Woman, woman,' he almost shouted at her in relief, 'when will you get some sense into your empty head?'

Kulsum's fear and anxiety gave place to a sense of anger. 'What are you guffawing for?' she barked back. 'I tell you Malek has not been seen for hours and you seem to think it is a matter for fun.'

Basir continued to laugh. He said, 'You came sweeping like a tragedy queen and I thought that something serious had happened. Now you tell me that Malek has slipped away from your apron strings. Could anything be more natural? When will you understand that he is a boy—on the way to young manhood, and you can't coddle him as if he were a female. Let a boy run about a little, take and give a few knocks—that's the way a boy grows up.'

He looked at Kulsum with a twinkle in his eyes. She did not seem impressed. She smiled in scorn and said, 'Enough of your bragging. Here's the boy gone away for hours—he has never been away for so long. And yet, you know no better than to deliver a sermon on male superiority. Superiority indeed! I should like to see one man who is not a foolish windbag.'

She swung round and went in with loud angry steps. Half-way she stopped and turned, and added with icy politeness, 'If it is not too much trouble, will you deign to stir and look for the boy?'

Basir snorted in contempt and tried to go back to his hookah. The old quiet mood would not however return. Kulsum had spoiled the atmosphere, and now, try as he would, he could not expel disturbing thoughts. Half in anger and half in idle curiosity, he prowled out of the house and walked towards the masjid which was the centre of village life.

The masjid was not much to look at, for it was a hut with a thatched roof and an earthen floor. What distinguished it from an ordinary house was the fact that it did not have the usual walls. Instead, a wooden fence, about the height of a man's waist, ran round three sides, and on the west, a platform jutted out from the centre and formed a small alcove, where the *Imam* stood while he led the congregational prayer. The only furniture consisted of mats. Some were spread on the floor, and some lay rolled up on a side for use of prayerful men.

Now the afternoon service was over, and it was yet some time before evening prayers. Some of the old men who had come for their afternoon prayers had not left, for the interval

between the two services was not great. During the sowing or the reaping season even this interval was too precious to pass in idleness, but now, with the harvest in, men could sit and talk of things mundane and otherwise.

Today, Basir found a hot discussion going on when he arrived. For a moment, the argument stopped as the speaker turned to him and said, 'Well, I must say it is a surprise to find you here, Basir! Since Nazu Mia's death, you have become as scarce as a . . .'

Basir smiled apologetically. 'You know, *Panchayat*, how entangled I have become since the old *Panchayat* died. His orphan son is in my charge, and Allah alone knows, how heavily I feel the responsibility.' He suddenly remembered that he had come out to look for Malek and his face clouded.

'What's the matter?' asked Asgar Mia as he noticed the look on his face. 'Do you find young Malek a difficult child?'

Basir felt his loyalty was on the test. He protested, 'No, not at all. I tell you, *Panchayat*, you haven't a finer boy in the village than young Malek Mia.'

Asgar Mia smiled. 'I am glad to hear that,' he said. 'You know, Basir, that at one time Nazu Mia was perhaps my best friend in the world?'

Basir felt intrigued. Perhaps he would learn what had turned such friendship into bitter animosity. Even if the mystery remained unsolved, perhaps he would get a clue about its origin and nature.

Cautiously he said, 'We have heard of your friendship, and have often wondered why the friendship was broken. Would to Allah that you had remained always friends.'

He looked eagerly at Asgar Mia, but suddenly the latter had become cold and reserved. Coldly he said, 'Would to Allah, it had been so, but it was not Allah's will that it should be so.'

He turned to the man he had been talking to before Basir's arrival on the scene. 'You say, Gulu Mia,' he said, 'that Aziz is not prepared to abide by my arbitration?'

Gulu Mia shifted uneasily in his seat. 'He hasn't said so *Panchayat*, but some evil persons have been at him. They

have put it into his head that he quarrelled with you in the past and you may still be offended with him.'

'Of course, I am offended with him,' burst out Asgar Mia, 'and what you say makes me still more angry. That does not however mean I shall do him injustice. My quarrel with him is my personal affair, but when I arbitrate, I shall arbitrate as the *Panchayat*—as the representative of all of you.'

'But *Panchayat*.....' began Gulu Mia.

'I know what you are going to say,' interrupted Asgar Mia. 'You are going to say, "How can he have faith in me when I openly admit that I am angry with him?" But don't you see that that is exactly why you should have faith in me?'

Gulu Mia looked at him with puzzled eyes. 'That's why we should have faith in you?' he repeated in an incredulous voice.

'Yes, have faith in me,' repeated Asgar Mia with emphasis. 'Don't you see that if I am angry with Aziz, and people know my feelings, I shall have to be especially careful lest people should say that I have been unjust to him out of a grouse. If I had said that I am friendly with him, it would be natural to suspect me. Who would believe that I should forget my feelings so soon? No, no, Gulu Mia, it is good for Aziz that I don't like him, for it will make me extra cautious in passing judgement against him.'

Asgar Mia looked round in triumph and sought corroboration from the assembled men. It was obvious that they were impressed by his words and yet they could not entirely make up their minds. To be just to an enemy because he is an enemy—well, this was a subtlety they could hardly understand. And yet, people knew Asgar Mia to be a truthful man.

'Yes, I see,' said Gulu Mia, but there was hardly any conviction in his voice.

Asgar Mia marked the doubt and perplexity in his voice. He smiled, but there was a tinge of sadness in his smile. His manner was gentle as he asked, 'Why did you elect me *pancahyat* after Nazu Mia's death? Because you believed me to be unjust?'

'No,' the men replied in chorus. 'Your worst enemy will admit that you have always been fair and honest.'

'All right then,' said Asgar Mia. 'You take me to be honest, but what would my honesty be worth if I allowed personal feelings to interfere with my judgement? Is it honest to give a wrong decision because one of the parties is a friend and the other an enemy?'

The men looked at one another and nodded in assent. Certainly what Asgar Mia said was right but was it possible? Feelings should be kept out in giving a judgement, but could feelings be altogether ignored? They looked at him with a new curiosity in their eyes. If he did as he said, he was a type they had not often met. Rahim Buksh and Nazu Mia—the two *panchayats* they had known were good men in their own way. They were generous and open-hearted but they had never spared enemies or condemned friends. 'Friends are always in the right and enemies always in the wrong'—well, this was a policy they could understand, but obviously Asgar Mia thought otherwise.

Asgar Mia got up. 'Well, brothers,' he said, 'it is time for the evening prayers. The glow has almost disappeared from the sky and darkness is creeping upon the world.'

The call to prayers rang out in the evening sky. The sonorous Arabic sounds hung tremulously in the air and were echoed from the distant fields. A few stragglers hurried from the village at the call and joined in the line of praying men. The small congregation stood up in the gathering darkness and offered their devotion to the Unseen that shapes human destiny.

CHAPTER V

Basir returned home thoughtfully. He turned over Asgar Mia's words in his mind. It was obvious he was impressed and yet he could not fully shut out his misgivings. It was one thing to use fine words, but were not more evil deeds done under cover of fine words than one could remember? Was Asgar Mia an honest and downright man or was he a sanctimonious hypocrite? His past record was fair, and Basir had to admit grudgingly that in spite of his enmity with Nazu Mia, there had been few occasions when he acted in a mean or dishonest manner.

His reverie was shattered by the reception he got at home. It seemed Kulsum and Gulabi were waiting for him, for no sooner had he stepped near the house than they rushed out and cried, 'Where is Malek?'

'Malek? Hasn't he returned?' asked Basir.

It was quite dark and Malek should have returned long ago. Had there been some mishap? The idea shot through his consciousness like a spasm of pain but he forced himself to be quiet, and repeated his question, 'Malek went out while you were asleep and hasn't yet returned?'

'Have you lost your hearing or your wits?' snapped Kulsum. She was on edge with terror. 'I thought you went out to look for Malek and now you return and keep on repeating foolish questions.'

'How am I to know that he hasn't returned while I was out?' grumbled Basir and went into the room. He picked up his staff and balanced it on his hand. Cut from ripe old bamboo quite half an inch in diameter, it was strengthened with iron hoops. It was a formidable weapon and Basir fondled it affectionately.

'Where are you going?' asked Kulsum.

'To look for Malek,' Basir replied coldly, and added under his breath, 'Once I catch the imp, I will teach him a lesson he will not easily forget.'

Kulsum asked, 'What shall we do? Will you leave us

alone in the house ?'

'Don't be silly,' returned Basir. 'Nobody is going to devour you if I am away for half an hour. If you are really afraid, you can go to the next house and wait till I return.'

'And suppose Malek comes while we are all out ?' asked Kulsum.

'Don't go on supposing all the time,' said Basir sharply. 'If you like to stay at home, do so. If you don't, very well, go to the next house and wait. You can't have it both ways, and I can't waste my time in useless talk.'

In a gentler tone he added, 'Malek won't return alone in this darkness. Perhaps it was late and he is waiting in somebody's house.'

Finally, after more argument, it was settled that Kulsum and Gulabi should stay at home. Cursing the women for the useless delay, Basir strode out of the house. He held his staff firmly in his hand ; all his senses were alert as he walked. Life was still unsettled in these parts and there were enemies who wouldn't hesitate to do him in if they could. One blow from behind—and the dark night offered many chances—and he would disappear for ever from the village scene. The Padma flowed near by and her current would carry away all traces of the crime.

Suddenly, Basir's body became tense. Suppose that some enemy had got hold of Malek and his body now floated down Padma's waters ? A small body on her flood was like a speck on the vastness of the sky—who would notice it even by day ? Night had wiped away with her darkness the sharp definition of things. Only the stars burnt like pinpoints of light in the depth of the firmament. Allah was merciful—His was the glory and the power. Would he allow wicked men to harm a poor child ? A numb fear weighed upon his heart, and sadness that was heavy and speechless.

A reddish gleam showed through the cluster of trees. It hardly illuminated the darkness and yet Basir felt grateful for its faint glow. It seemed friendly and human and he quickened his steps as he walked towards it. A chorus of barks rose angrily, and small shapes leaped out of the darkness. Basir

beat on the ground with his staff and loudly cursed the dogs. 'Who's there?' shouted a voice from behind the glow and blotted it out for a moment as he advanced.

'Stop your dogs, Gulu Mia,' shouted back Basir. 'It is I, Basir, from Nazu Mia's house.'

'Basir Mia,' said Gulu Mia in a surprised voice. 'What brings you here so late?'

He came towards Basir and called back the dogs. The lamp in his hand threw fantastic shadows on the trees around. The men and the dogs looked like creatures born of a diseased imagination.

'What is the matter?' repeated Gulu Mia.

'Have you seen Malek?' asked Basir, but he already knew that the question was in vain.

'Malek?' replied Gulu Mia in surprise, 'why, hasn't he returned home yet?'

'No,' replied Basir gloomily. 'He went out in the afternoon and hasn't been seen since.'

'That is very strange,' said Gulu Mia. 'I was in the masjid the whole afternoon, but I will ask if the boys have seen him. *Matin, Matin,*' he shouted, and a young boy of ten with a lock of unruly hair came out.

'Did you see Malek today?' asked Basir.

'Malek came to play yesterday but I haven't seen him since,' replied the boy and added, 'Sabu may perhaps know, for they are great friends.'

Basir bade them good-bye and made for Sabu's house. Perhaps he would find Malek there. He must give the boy a scolding for his thoughtlessness—keeping everybody in an agony of suspense and anxiety like this!

The darkness was almost solid inside the village. Large trees towered above the path. Even on moonlit nights, the light could hardly seep through the thick foliage. Tonight, a few faint stars showed through an opening here and there. Fireflies gleamed in the darkness, but Basir had hardly any thought for the beauty of the night. In his pre-occupation, he hurried on, forgetful even of the danger which had made him so cautious when he first set out.

Soon he reached Sabu's house. Dogs began to bark as he approached but he paid no heed. 'Sabu, Sabu,' he shouted and somebody stirred inside the house, but there was no reply.

'Sabu,' he shouted again, and the dogs leaped and barked all round, but still there was no reply. He waved his staff and the dogs howled and drew back, and he came almost up to the door.

'Sabu,' he shouted once more, and added in a loud voice, 'Is there nobody inside the house?'

He could hear mutterings and somebody moved, but none came out of the house. He lost his patience and beat with his staff upon the door and cried, 'Is everybody in this house dead?'

A thin flame peeped out of a crevice in the wall. A voice spoke, 'What do you want at this late hour?'

'I want to see Sabu,' replied Basir.

'Why? What for? Who are you?' asked the voice.

'Come out and see!' shouted Basir in exasperation.

'You must first say who you are,' insisted the voice.

'I am Basir of Nazu Mia's house,' said Basir.

'Is it you, Basir Mia,' came the reply and the door was opened. A tall thin fellow crept out and said, 'What do you want Sabu for at this late hour?'

He added in an apologetic voice, 'Don't mind my delay in coming out. Who knows what spirits move about in the night? Even if it be not one of them, one must be careful of robbers and thieves.'

Basir smiled in contempt. 'Yes, always afraid of spirits and ghosts and hobgoblins. But tell me where is Sabu?'

'Sabu is asleep,' said the man.

'Well, call him,' impatiently said Basir.

The man went in and after a little while came out with Sabu, who was only half-awake and was rubbing his eyes.

'What do you want, Basir *chacha*,' he asked sleepily.

'Where is Malek?' Basir shook him and asked.

'Malek?' In a moment, the boy had lost his sleepiness. 'But how am I to know? He left me in a huff in the afternoon and I haven't seen him since.'

'You don't know where he is now?' asked Basir once more.

'But how can I?' replied the boy. 'Why did he quarrel with me?' Quickly he added, 'It was not my fault, Malek started the fight, I had—'

Basir interrupted him impatiently, 'I have no time to listen to your prattle. You then don't know where Malek is?'

'No,' replied the boy in a huff. He felt hurt that Basir should stop him before he could explain.

Without a word, Basir turned round and strode into the darkness. The dogs were cowed for a moment, but soon let off a howl of rage. Sabu's brother muttered, 'What an unmannerly churl—he did not even care to say good night after dragging us out of bed!'

Sabu chimed in, 'Just like Malek, *bhaijan*. He fought me for nothing. I had only said that Nuru—,' but his brother had already gone into the room and sharply called him in.

Basir strode back home and did not stop on the way. What was the use of going from one house to another and unnecessarily troubling people at night? If Malek had been in any house in the village, the men would have brought him home. It was more likely that some mishap had happened. Padma had taken Nazu Mia and Ayesha—but she was insatiate. Perhaps it was Malek's turn and she had taken him too? It was no use trying to do anything at night. What could he do when he did not know where to go and what to expect? No, let the night be over. In the morning he would find out if any boats were missing. Then he would decide what to do.

It was with a heavy heart that the small household prepared to retire. Kulsum said she wanted no food as she was not feeling well. Gulabi chafed and pressed her to take something. An empty stomach is not necessary for clean thoughts, she said. Silently, they laid some food before Basir and he silently sat down to eat.

In the distance a torch flared. Basir wondered who it might be. It was not usual for people to move about after dark. His wonder increased when he found the torch moving in the direction of their house. Soon some shadows became defined—the darkness was materializing into the semblance of human figures. Basir's wonder became touched with anxiety.

Could it bode any good that men with torches should approach their house? He counted the shadows. The light was uncertain and he could not be sure. Blurred voices could be heard and Basir surmised that there must be at least three or four men in the company.

He wondered what to do. Should he call Kulsum and Gulabi and retreat into one of the bushes for safety? Would it be safe to do so? If the torch belonged to robbers, surely they must have placed scouts in the neighbourhood. Going out of the house would mean walking into their trap. Should he retire into the strong room of the house? As the thought came to him, he smiled at its futility. Since Nazu Mia's death, it had never been used. Even if it were in order, how could he, alone, hold out against a band of robbers?

He submitted himself to fate and decided to wait. There was little else he could do, for by now the men were almost upon the house. In the uncertain light he could make out four figures of fantastic shape and size. One of them seemed preternaturally tall and cast a shadow that looked menacing and gigantic.

A voice rose above the murmur of whispers. Basir started as he recognized it. Asgar Mia was shouting his name. Once, twice, thrice, he shouted, 'Basir, Basir, Basir.'

There could now be no mistake. Certainty only increased his wonder. What could Asgar Mia want with him at such a late hour? And who were the men with him and what did it all portend? What could be the meaning of the superhuman figure that towered above the rest?

There was no time for delay or thought. 'Basir!' shouted Asgar Mia insistently and Basir came out.

'What brings you here at this hour?' asked Basir, but before Asgar Mia could reply, a shrill voice burst out in triumph, 'Look, I am taller than you, Basir *chacha*!' It was Malek perched upon the shoulders of one of the men.

The situation was explained in a few words. Asgar Mia on his way home from the masjid had come upon Malek and Nuru. They were held fast in the mud of the canal that separated Nazu Mia's house from that of Asgar Mia. Evidently

Nuru had exaggerated when she said that the canal was dry. There was still a channel of water a few yards wide and three or four feet deep. Over this the villagers had put up a bamboo bridge—a precarious foothold offered by one pole supported by posts on either side. Nuru did not trust herself to this bridge and Malek had offered to punt her across in a tub that lay near by. This had resulted in tragedy. For there was thick mud in the channel. After they had crossed half way, the pole had stuck. Malek could neither pull it out, nor would he let it go, lest the tub should drift in the current which was still fairly strong.

Asgar Mia had laughed at their discomfiture, and found no difficulty in rescuing them. 'Why didn't you try to wade across?' he asked Malek, who gravely replied that he had thought of doing so, but desisted on two considerations. One was the coldness of the water, for there was a nip in the winter wind. The other was the fear lest he too should stick in the mud like the punting pole. This had made Asgar Mia laugh still more, but the gravity of the lad remained unshaken.

All this Asgar Mia related with relish, and Basir could not help joining in the laughter. Malek from his perch looked at their laughter with supreme unconcern. How childish these grown-ups are—he seemed to say as he looked with wide open eyes from Asgar Mia to Basir, and from Basir to Asgar Mia.

The appearance of Kulsum on the scene upset his gravity. She came with her veil pulled well over her face—a covered figure which moved quickly and yet rapidly. Malek tumbled down from his perch and ran to her. She gathered him in her arms and moved away without a word. Almost before others realized, she had come and gone.

Asgar Mia told Basir that he had taken Malek home. How could he leave him alone in the gathering darkness? There Malek had dined with him and now he had brought the child back lest Basir and others should worry about him.

'After all, Nazu Mia was at one time my best friend,' he added with almost undue emphasis.

CHAPTER VI

Basir argued the matter long with Gulabi and Kulsum. It was difficult to decide, but in the end he had hardly any option. The tenants refused all rent and he felt it beyond his power to enforce payment. He was aging, and rapidly, since Nazu Mia's death. If the rent was to be collected at all, the *panchayat* had to interfere.

He made up his mind and walked to Asgar Mia's house one morning. He had never gone there before, though he had seen the house from afar. It lay near the place where the canal joined the river and consisted of two large cottages and several smaller huts. The cottage on the river side served as his drawing room and guest house. Its high earthen floor was smooth and polished, and a bamboo bench ran along the sides of the larger room. In the centre was a platform, also of bamboo, which was covered with mats. Two small huts near by housed the farm hands, and in between them was built a granary—a round hut on a bamboo platform instead of the usual earthen floor. The cowsheds were by the canal, and the inner cottage showed behind the granary.

Asgar Mia was sitting in the courtyard sunning himself and smoking as he supervised the treatment of a cow that was ill. It lay on the ground with its feet tied. Several men held it down while another man sizzled its buttocks with a red hot iron. It was lowing piteously and the noise drowned the voices of the men.

Basir saluted Asgar Mia and asked, 'What is the matter with it, *Panchayat* ?'

Asgar Mia removed the hookah from his lips and returned the salute. 'It's nothing much,' he said, 'a simple case for branding.' Then he asked, 'What brings you here, Basir ?'

Basir came straight to the point. 'I came to ask your advice and help, *Pcnahayat*,' he said.

'What for ?' asked Asgar Mia and went on smoking.

'It is about Malek,' said Basir and looked at him expectantly, but he made no sign and looked as unperturbed as before.

Such self-possession disturbed Basir; he felt somewhat uncomfortable. He wanted to get the matter off his chest and blurted out—'Since Nazu Mia's death, I have been looking after Malek's property. I am finding it more and more difficult to collect the rent from the tenants. Unless you help, I don't know what I shall do.'

Asgar Mia continued to smoke and only the gurgle of his hookah broke the silence. Basir fidgetted but dared not say anything. At last Asgar Mia spoke and his voice was quiet and level.

'Nazu Mia regarded me as his bitterest enemy. How will people take it if I interfere in the affairs of his minor son, now that he is dead? How will you take it yourself?' Asgar Mia shot a glance at Basir and Basir felt as if he would look right through him.

'We know you to be an honest man and we cannot believe that you will defraud an orphan,' replied Basir obstinately.

There was the faintest suspicion of a smile on Asgar Mia's face but he retained his level voice. 'Do you really mean it?' he asked, 'or is it that you think it proper to say so?'

Basir could not make out what Asgar Mia was driving at. He replied promptly, 'You ask any man in the village and he will tell you that Basir never says what he does not mean. I may be a fool but I am no liar.'

Asgar Mia smiled. 'Don't you think it is all very sudden?' he said. 'Nazu Mia fought me all his life and I fought him. Now when he is dead, you come and ask me to help his son. How am I to take it? What are your intentions? Are you serious? Do you really want to help Malek or have you an eye on his property?'

Basir felt his gorge rise. The veins on his forehead stood out as he struggled to control his temper. But his voice was dogged and stubborn as he said, 'I have no evil designs. If I had, I would not come to you by day in the sight of all. And indeed, why should I come to you at all? The *Dewan* promised to transfer all the land to me if only I would pay a *nazar*. Have I done so? I am an old man with one foot in the grave. Is it proper to mock me, *Panchayat*?''

The smile on Asgar Mia's face broadened. He said, 'Who will say that you are an old man? You have all the fire and impatience of a raw young man.'

He continued in a steadier tone. 'You ask me to help Malek. In what way can I do so? Whatever I might do, people will impute motives to me. Even if I try to be just, will the men of the village trust me? May it not be that I shall lose my *panchayat* over this?'

Basir replied, 'Will you let such fear stand in the way of justice? You know that Malek is an orphan. I am an old man past three scores and ten. Why should people pay us the rent that is due?'

Asgar Mia asked, 'What do you want me to do?'

Basir spoke cautiously. 'I want to make a suggestion, *Panchayat*, and if you agree, we can decide the details.'

Asgar Mia looked at him and waited. Basir continued, 'If you take all Nazu Mia's lands on lease from Malek and farm them out as you like, we shall have no cause for fear or anxiety. The tenants will not pay us the rent, but when they know they have to deal with you, it will be a different story. You will collect all the dues, deduct the necessary collection charges and pay the balance to Malek.'

Asgar Mia was taken aback by the proposal. He would not however show his surprise. He realized that this was perhaps the best arrangement, but the risks? His whole reputation would be at stake. Even if the tenants did not pay, he would have to make good Malek's losses. Basir was shrewder than he had thought, felt Asgar Mia.

Outwardly he remained calm and continued smoking. The steady gurgle of his hookah broke the silence and the rich thick smoke rose up in rings. Basir looked at Asgar Mia expectantly and waited for a reply.

At last Asgar Mia spoke. His voice was level and cold. 'What you say requires consideration. I can't give you a reply off-hand. If I agree, I will perhaps take on more than I want to. Should there be the least mistake, I would have to answer before God and man. If I don't agree, men cannot blame me, but perhaps I shall be guilty before Allah. You must give me

time to think.'

Basir felt that he had won his point. He said as he stood up to go, 'Certainly, you must think the matter over, *Panchayat*. But let your conscience alone be your guide. Don't let what others might say or think sway your judgement.'

Asgar Mia did not reply and only bowed his head in acknowledgement of Basir's salutation. Basir strode away and the *Panchayat* watched him go with absent eyes. Slowly Nuru crept up and curled into his lap. He kept on smoking and watched the smoke curl into fantastic shapes.

It all came about as Basir had planned. Asgar Mia called a meeting of the village elders and asked them to make some arrangements about Nazu Mia's land.

Basir was frank in his admission. 'I cannot look after the land,' he said, 'for I am an old man and cannot realize the rent from the tenants.'

The men looked at one another. What could be done, they wondered. It was the same old story—a man died and left his widow and children helpless. In these unsettled tracts, only a man's strong arm could harvest home what he had himself planted in the fields. In the background there always loomed the threat from the Padma, Padma the hungry serpent who had swallowed families and homesteads beyond count. In such a case, if the widow was young, she married again, and her husband looked after her and her children. Malek's was a more difficult case. He was an orphan without anybody to call his own. The old man Basir was no blood relation and in any case he was too old to manage things by himself. The maidservants—Gulabi and Kulsum,—themselves needed protection as much as the orphan boy.

Basir appealed to the elders that Asgar Mia should take up Malek's lands and pay him a fair annual rent. This arrangement should continue till Malek was eighteen. He would then have the option of taking back his lands or selling them outright to Asgar Mia.

Again the elders looked at one another. They could hardly make up their minds. Was Asgar Mia trying to get

possession of Malek's lands with Basir's connivance? Or was it a *bona fide* offer for better management of Malek's lands?

The silent elders looked at Asgar Mia. Perhaps his demeanour would give a clue to his mind. His face was calm and inscrutable and he continued to puff at his hookah. He was not the person to give away his thoughts. The elders hardly knew what to say or think. They wanted that justice should be done and an orphan's interests safe-guarded, but were they willing to make any effort for the purpose? That was asking too much. Each had his own worries, enough to keep him busy from morning till evening, year in and year out. How could they undertake to look after an orphan boy's lands in addition to their own?

At last one of them spoke. 'What is your intention, *Panchayat*?' he asked.

Asgar Mia paused perceptibly before he replied. He weighed every word with care till they seemed to drop like leaden bullets into a well of silence.

'I wish Allah would tell me what to do,' he said. 'It is difficult for me to take Malek's lands on lease. You know, my brothers, my relation with the late Nazu Mia (may Allah rest his soul in peace). Now he is dead and death should wipe out all enmity. But the human heart is weak and evil tongues wag. What shall I say? If I agree, many of you will think it is a trick to cheat Malek out of his patrimony. Even if I should try my best, there will be some who will be suspicious and evil-minded, and perhaps evil-tongued as well. We are farmers and know that there are good years and bad. Whatever I might do, people will say I have not done enough. And yet, if I don't agree to take the land, what will happen to Malek? He cannot control his tenants and will lose what he has. I shall not be blamed by men, but how shall I answer to Allah on the day of Judgement? In the name of Allah I swear that if any of you are willing to take the land on lease, I shall wash my hands of it. Then perhaps I shall have peace and also keep my good name.'

The elders were obviously impressed by his words.

Nobody ventured to come forward with a solution. Asgar

Mia looked at each in turn but nobody gave a sign.

Basir could not stand the strain any longer. 'It is useless to parry words, *Panchayat*. Either you have to take on the job yourself or leave things in the hands of Allah. If you are not willing to shoulder the burden, none else will.'

The elders still kept silent. Asgar Mia repeated his question, 'Is there anyone who is willing to take up this job? Allah is my witness that I shall be grateful to the man who may relieve me of such irksome duty.'

One of the elders spoke. 'It is as you say, *Panchayat*,' he said. 'An orphan's land is a difficult proposition. Allah will not pardon the man who defrauds an orphan boy. The task is too difficult, and nobody dares to take it up. You should yourself consider deeply before you agree to take up the charge.'

Asgar Mia smiled quietly. 'I have thought about it, my friends,' he said, 'and I can assure you that I would avoid it if I could. For three days and nights have I pondered and wrestled with myself. Now it seems to be Allah's will that I must do this work. I swear in the name of Allah and His Prophet that I shall strive my utmost to be just and fair. May His anger burn me up if I should defraud an orphan of even a jot of his property. Every year, on full-moon day in *Baisakh*, I shall give an account of my stewardship to the meeting of the village elders, and if I err or go wrong, I shall submit to any chastisement that you might impose.'

CHAPTER VII

Malek was astonished the first time he saw Nuru's mother. He had heard that she was beautiful. Some said that she was more beautiful than anybody they had ever seen, but still Malek was surprised when he first saw her. She was very fair and her dark tresses set off the pale purity of her face. She clasped Malek to her heart and pressed him silently and long. He felt shy and yet happy and quietly lay in her arms, when the surprised exclamation of Nuru made him quickly raise his head.

'Why are you weeping, mother?' cried Nuru and nestled close to her. Malek could feel the hot silent tears drop on his head and too astonished to say anything, he looked at her with wide-open eyes.

Asgar Mia walked into the room but when he saw his wife weeping with Malek in her arms, he went out without a word. Nuru saw him and ran after him. 'Look, father, mother is weeping,' she cried.

'Yes, my child,' quietly replied Asgar Mia.

'Why is she weeping?' asked Nuru.

'Malek has lost his father and granny, and has no one to look after him, my child. That is why your mother is weeping,' replied Asgar Mia.

Nuru's mother dried her eyes and quietly put Malek on the floor. She drew Nuru to herself and said, 'Nuru, here is a brother for you. You will be good to him, won't you?'

'But I am good—I am always good,' said Nuru.

'And Malek, you will always be gentle with your little sister?' she said.

Malek shyly nodded his head. He hardly knew what to say. His heart was full of mingled joy and sadness and he felt like laughing and crying simultaneously.

Now began a new life for Malek. He lived with Asgar Mia and was soon like a son to him. Asgar Mia went to work in the fields and Malek accompanied him. He would

sit on the harrow as Asgar Mia drove the bullocks. When Asgar Mia was tired and sat under the banyan tree to rest, Malek would prepare his hookah and light the fire for his smoke. When the sun blazed high in the sky, he would go home and bring for Asgar Mia his meal of rice and curried fish. They would spread banana leaves upon the ground and take out of the earthen pot the steaming rice. The farmhands also sat down to eat; master and men would dine together on the edge of the paddy fields. After the meal was over, the older men would spread their towels in a row and fall into line for the midday prayer. The voice of the *muazzin* quivered in the heat. The Imam would lead the congregation to his deep sonorous note of *Allahu Akbar*—Verily God is great.

After prayers, some of the men would rest for a while. The midday siesta was a luxury unknown to them but the tired limbs clamoured for a little rest. How grateful it was to lie down for a few minutes after the gruelling work in the fields! Asgar Mia would not lie down. He would take his hookah and enjoy a silent smoke. The deep tones of the hookah soothed the tired nerves. His eyes would grow dreamy as he looked over his fields and saw the tender green of the young shoots. Malek would sit by his side and look around with the wide and open-eyed wonder of a young child to whom the beauty of the earth has not yet grown stale.

Some of the men would again be at work. Sometimes Malek helped, when the work was unusually heavy and farm hands scarce. Often, he would sit in the shade and watch the men. He would take a knife with him and carve out of a piece of bamboo neat little toys. His face lit with joy as he thought of the gift he would bring to Nuru.

The day's dazzling light would slowly mellow in the afternoon. When the sun was high in the sky, things lost their definition in its radiance. With softening light, things stood out more sharply. The shadows would lengthen under the trees. The whole earth breathed a sigh of tired content. Men and beasts moved more eagerly with the approach of the hour of rest. Malek would collect his scattered things as Asgar Mia came striding across the fields. He would cast a last glance to

see what remained undone and speak a word of encouragement to one, a word of reproof to another. In the growing coolness of the evening, he would walk homeward while Malek trotted by his side. A thin mist rose from the fields and moved slowly across. The light wavered and its quality changed, when suddenly, almost without any warning, darkness covered earth and sky at one swift stride.

Through the lengthening shadow of the village trees, Asgar Mia returned home. While they walked through the village, Malek would be quiet and silent. As soon as they were clear of the trees and the open fields gleamed on the banks of the canal, his steps would quicken. He would rush ahead, eager to reach home before anybody else. Nuru would be standing in the courtyard and would hail him with a shout of glee.

'What have you brought me, Malekbhai?' she would eagerly ask.

Sometimes Malek had nothing and then he would smile. But on other days he had some new toy, perhaps a doll, carved out of bamboo, perhaps only a bunch of wild berries that had a tang. Then he would look important and say nothing. Nuru would hang about, eager to find out what he had brought, but he would wash slowly and rub himself with deliberate care. Nuru's patience would soon give way. With a toss of her curls, she would fling towards the inner house with a muttered 'I don't want anything from anybody'. It would then be Malek's turn to coax and cajole her and press upon her his precious gift. Easily appeased, she would bring him cool water to drink and show in a hundred little ways her appreciation of the gift.

Asgar Mia dined in the inner house, but before he sat down to meal, he would supervise the dinner of his farm-hands. Large brass bowls filled with hot steaming rice were brought and vegetables finely chopped. Eggfruit and gourds were there and large vessels filled with thin soup of pulse. The men would sit on the bamboo platforms in the outhouses and the bowls full of rice and pulse were passed round till they had their fill. Then they would light the hookah and sit round the courtyard. Small clusters gossiped here and there, while

a few of the older men would begin to wash themselves for the prayers at night. Sometimes, on a moonlit night, a young man would slip away to the river bank, and soon the plaintive notes of the bamboo flute would come floating across the silence.

Asgar Mia went in after the men had finished their meals. He would wash himself carefully and sit on the mat that Nuru spread for him on the verandah of the sleeping room. Malek would sit by his side while the plates were laid. Whenever Asgar Mia dined at home Nuru would dine with him. She now brought her small plate and sat down by her father's side. In the dim and uncertain light of an earthen lamp, Nuru's mother served them with hot and tasteful food. She brought them hot steaming rice and eggfruit fried in oil. Chillies were ground into a paste and spread upon the fried eggfruit like a rich thick sauce. The rich hot food burnt his tongue and brought water to his eyes. But the hotter it was the more Malek loved it. Raw onions and garlic soaked in oil added to the zest of the meal. She brought them cups of thick buffalo milk and cakes steeped in the treacle of the date palm juice.

When Malek came to live with Asgar Mia, Gulabi went to live with her aunt in a neighbouring village. She said that she was now growing old. She had grown accustomed to the ways of Ayesha, but now Ayesha was dead. She did not know how Nuru's mother ran her house and she had neither the wish nor the strength to learn her new ways so late in life. Kulsum railed and laughed at her, but she had made up her mind. One day she collected her few belongings and walked out of Malek's life.

Gulabi's departure made little impression on Malek's mind, but the parting from Kulsum proved more painful.

She did not want to leave Malek and came with him to live in Asgar Mia's house. In a few days she felt that Nuru's mother did not like her. Her new mistress hardly ever scolded her nor was she harsh in manner or speech. In fact, unlike old Ayesha, she was gentle of speech and quiet in her movements, and yet in a few days Kulsum knew that she was not welcome in the house. Quietly and without fuss,

she found herself put to work that took her away from Malek, for her new mistress seemed to resent her love for Malek more than anything else. She had Malek to herself for hardly a moment now, and whenever she tried to get near him, her new mistress would send her away on some errand or other.

Malek came rushing into the house. 'Kulsum, where are you? Bring me water, for I am thirsty,' he cried. Before Kulsum could move, Nuru's mother called Malek to her and gave him water-melon to cool his thirst. She would tell him fairy stories and stories of kings and princes and demons and ghosts. Malek listened with wide-eyed wonder as she went on reciting the stories in her soft low voice.

Nuru sat on her mother's lap and swallowed the stories avidly. Sometimes she asked a question—a childish query that brought a smile on her mother's face. Quickly she looked at Malek with a twinkle in her eyes and Malek smiled back at her, grateful that she should treat him as an equal and grown-up. Kulsum hovered somewhere near, anxious to come in and join the circle, but as soon as Nuru's mother saw her, she asked, 'Is the rice husked for tomorrow's meal?'

Kulsum replied that she did not know and Nuru's mother sent her away to enquire. In a few minutes, Kulsum came back. They had started husking the rice, she reported. Nuru's mother asked her to go and join them.

'Now, be a good girl, Kulsum,' she said, 'and see that the work is quickly done.' Resentful but without saying a word, Kulsum went away to the husking house. Nuru's mother continued her story for the children.

One day Kulsum caught hold of Basir. 'I can't continue like this,' she said.

'Why, what has happened?' asked Basir in surprise. He hardly lived at home, for most of his time was spent in collecting the rents from the tenants.

'Nothing has happened and that is the trouble,' replied Kulsum. Her eyes were angry and she was full of suppressed excitement.

'Don't talk in enigmas,' said Basir, in a tone of mixed amusement and impatience.

'You don't live here and you won't see how we live,' began Kulsum, when Basir interrupted her: 'Why does Nuru's mother ill-treat you in any way?'

Kulsum could not control herself any more. She burst out, 'I wish she would try to ill-treat me, for I could then give her a piece of my mind. But no, she is sweet, so, sweet and gentle! She is cold and soft like a serpent and twines herself round you and then strikes when she will.'

'What are you saying, woman!' Basir broke in. 'Have you lost your senses to speak thus of your mistress? Why, everyone speaks well of her, and Malek is full of praise for her....' but Kulsum would not let him finish.

'Malek is full of praise for her,' she mimicked, in a tone of bitter resentment. 'She is a witch—this woman that you call Nuru's mother. She has bewitched Malek. How else to explain why Malek who was so fond of me never comes near me now? And she won't let him. Whenever Malek comes into the house, she sends me away on some pretext or other. "Kulsum, do this," "Kulsum, do that." As if I didn't see through her wiles. I tell you, Basir *chucha*, she has bewitched Malek.'

Basir could not help a smile. 'So, that's the root of the trouble, eh? Malek is growing fonder of her than you? Foolish fears apart, should we not be glad that it is so? If she hadn't taken kindly to Malek, just think how bad it would be. Allah be praised that she is fond of Malek. You must not allow your foolish jealousy to spoil it in any way.'

'Foolish jealousy!' burst out the irate Kulsum. 'I should have guessed that you would all fall for her just because she is pretty.'

Basir began to laugh. 'Now, who is being foolish and obstinate, you silly girl? I have never cast my eyes on her. How should I know whether she is pretty or not? And even if she is pretty, what of it? Speaking seriously, you must be more careful, Kulsum. It is well that you have spoken to me. If you had spoken to somebody else, and called your mistress a witch, just try to think what would have happened? You must be patient and sensible, Kulsum.'

Kulsum burst into tears. 'So I am foolish and obstinate,' she said between her sobs. 'Just because I can't see poor Malek bewitched and taken away from those who really love him, I must be scolded by you as well? All right, I shall say nothing more. I only hope that no harm befalls my dear young master.'

She left Basir in a huff and would not speak to him again. Soon everybody noticed the change in her, for she grew fretful and irascible. Nuru's mother watched the change and spoke to Asgar Mia about it.

'Kulsum is a young widow,' she said, 'and it is proper she should marry again. So long she has looked after Malek and treated him almost like a son, but that cannot continue. It will be good neither for her nor for Malek if she continues to coddle and spoil him. It is much better that we marry her to a proper person. She can then have a husband and a home and perhaps children of her own.'

Asgar Mia smiled his quiet gentle smile. 'You don't want to keep her near Malek, isn't that so?' he asked.

His wife did not speak and remained sitting with averted face.

'Well, it will be as you wish,' said Asgar Mia after a pause. 'Aziz lost his wife last year. He is about thirty-five. He will make a good match for Kulsum. I will speak to Basir and ask him to sound Aziz. You may also speak to Kulsum and find out if she is willing.'

'Of course she will be willing,' said his wife. 'What woman wouldn't like to have a home and husband of her own?'

Nuru's mother spoke to Kulsum that very evening. She said, 'You are still young, Kulsum, and it is proper that you should have a home and husband of your own. We have decided that you should marry Aziz. He also is young and has no wife; you have no husband. Besides neither of you have children. It will be a good match.'

Kulsum was living in dread since her talk with Basir. She had never thought that the danger would take this form. She flung herself on the ground and clasped her mistress's feet.

'Please don't send me away, mistress,' she cried, 'I don't want to marry and I don't want a husband or a home.'

'But this is foolish,' replied her mistress in a quiet tone. 'You are no chicken Kulsum and should not make a scene. Young girls no doubt make a fuss before marriage but then, after marriage, they don't want to leave their husbands for even a day. You have been married before and you ought to know.'

Kulsum began to weep. 'I don't want to marry, I don't,' she kept on repeating in the intervals of her sobs.

Her mistress spoke in a sharper tone. 'Don't make a scene, Kulsum,' she said. 'You are a young woman and can't stay here indefinitely. In fact you ought to have married long ago.'

She left Kulsum sobbing on the ground. After a few moments she returned and spoke in a gentler voice.

'You are sad at the thought of leaving Malek, but he is a young boy and you can't expect that he will always be with you,' she said. 'It is better that you should part from him, and if Allah wills, you will soon have a baby of your own.'

Kulsum sought out Basir. 'I don't want to marry, Basir *chacha*,' she said, 'and I don't want to leave Malek.'

Basir gently scolded her. 'Aziz is a good fellow,' he said, 'and you will be happy with him. Asgar Mia has promised to give him a plot of land to build a house. You will be in the same village with Malek and can see him whenever you want to. Don't raise any objection to this marriage.'

Kulsum remained obdurate. When the day of the wedding came, and the women put the bridal dress on her, they chafed her for her sullen and angry mien.

'She is impatient for her bridegroom,' they laughed and her looks grew darker with their jokes.

Aziz was full of glee at the thought of marriage. He was a strong lusty fellow and had lost his wife over a year ago. When he heard that Kulsum was pretty and only a little over twenty, he blessed his luck and agreed with alacrity to marry her. Today he was dressed in his best clothes and could hardly conceal his joy. A sheepish smile was smeared on his

face and his attempt to look grave only made him smirk the more. He sat on a carpet in the outhouse where the marriage rites were to be performed. Asgar Mia had agreed to act as *cadi* to solemnize the marriage and he now waited for Kulsum's agent to arrive. Kulsum would not herself appear on the scene, and old Basir would act as her agent. He had gone to get her consent to his agency. Two witnesses had gone with him to testify her consent. They were long in coming and Aziz grew more and more impatient.

It was not proper for a groom to speak but he was becoming restive and began to fidget. With a twinkle in his eyes, Asgar Mia said, 'Don't be so impatient, Aziz.'

The farm hands cut coarse jokes at his expense. They twitted him for his impatience and said that he must not worry too much. Since he had waited so long, why spoil everything at the last moment by unseemly haste?

The men burst out in loud guffaws and even Asgar Mia smiled. The delay in Basir's return was becoming noticeable and one of the men said, 'Perhaps the bride is frightened of Aziz and has run away!'

Aziz grew visibly pale, which provoked another loud guffaw from the assembled men.

At last Basir returned. He was worried and anxious, and called Asgar Mia aside. 'Kulsum does not want to marry,' he said.

Asgar Mia's face darkened with anger. 'It will be a scandal if the marriage is now put off,' he said. 'We can't allow a silly woman's fancy to upset all arrangements like this. Let us go in again. She *must* consent.'

Asgar Mia strode into the house with Basir and the witnesses. He met Nuru's mother near the door and angrily asked, 'What is this I hear? I told you before that you must secure Kulsum's consent. The marriage cannot now be put off. We must go on with it.'

Nuru's mother turned pale with anger. She said, 'Yes, the marriage will take place all right. Once the rites are over, Aziz will know how to tame her.'

They walked to the room where in her bridal robes,

Kulsum sat with lowered head.

'What is this I hear?' asked Asgar Mia angrily. 'Aziz is a fine fellow and you will be lucky to get him for a husband. Are you or are you not agreeable to this marriage?'

Kulsum did not reply. She was always a little shy before Asgar Mia and now his anger overawed her. She remained silent and with lowered head.

'Look, she consents,' said Nuru's mother in triumph.

'But she has not spoken out her consent,' said Asgar Mia half in doubt.

Nuru's mother laughed. 'Whoever has heard that a girl shouts out that she is anxious to marry? No, she is silent and silence means consent.'

Thrice Basir asked the question, 'Kulsum, do you agree to marry Aziz?'

She made no reply, but every time, some of the women caught hold of her head and made her nod.

'She has given her consent,' said Nuru's mother.

The men came out again and the marriage rites were duly performed. Asgar Mia acted as the *cadi* and asked Basir if he had authority to act for Kulsum.

Basir said 'yes' and brought forward the witness to testify to his claims.

Asgar Mia asked, 'Aziz, are you willing to take Kulsum to be your wife?'

Aziz replied with alacrity, 'yes'.

Thrice the question and answer were repeated and then Asgar Mia asked Basir, 'Is your principal, Kulsum, willing to take Aziz to be her husband?'

Basir replied in the affirmative. The question and answer were again repeated thrice. Asgar Mia read a verse from the Qoran, praying for blessings upon the newly married couple and the simple ceremony was over.

Late at night Kulsum woke with a start. Aziz was sleeping heavily by her side and had flung an arm over her. She felt a wave of resentment sweep over her as she remembered the incidents of her marriage, but she was young, and her body

MEN AND RIVERS

had responded to the passion of her husband. She blushed as she remembered his caresses and her resentment slowly died away. 'It must be as Allah wills,' she said with a sigh of resignation and turned over to sleep again.

CHAPTER VIII.

Asgar Mia looked grave and worried. He came out of his room in the morning and carefully scanned the eastern sky.

'No, not a speck of cloud,' he muttered with a shake of his head.

As far as the eye could stretch, the sky was brazen blue. It was early morning but there was hardly any grace or softness of morning light. Already the sun rode on high, and shot out arrows of sultry heat. The parched earth looked brown and burnt. A fine haze of dust rose to meet the scorching rays of the sun. The fields looked bare and empty and stretched hungrily. In the distance, the current of the Padma shone like a blade of steel.

Asgar Mia stood bareheaded underneath the burning sky. It was the month of *Asharh* but not a drop of rain had yet fallen. And without rain, how could one soften the earth and make it ready for the seeds? Already two precious months had passed. If it did not rain within a day or two, this year also would be a blank for the farmer. Asgar Mia shuddered as he thought of the possibility. The last two years had been years of scarcity. All the peasants had known hunger and sorrow. If the crops failed again this year, there would be starvation all round. Already, cases of petty theft were on the increase. They would increase a thousandfold if people did not have enough to eat.

In his heart Asgar Mia could not condemn the men who stole. They were perhaps men he knew—men steady and hard-working in normal times and as honest as one could find anywhere. When the crops failed in the first year, they had gone about searching for work. Their womenfolk and children wandered about seeking roots and grass with which to fill the sense of emptiness in their stomach. Many had come to him for work, but what work could he give? His fields lay barren and parched under the sun. Yet he was luckier than many,

MEN AND RIVERS

for some of his fields lay by the side of the river and could be watered from the stream. On these fields showed a thin line of green pale weakly shoots that seemed a mockery of the rich green floods that swept over them in better years.

The first year had been bearable though difficult. The men toiled like slaves, making channels to carry the water from the river to their fields. Near the river, they set up poles and drew water to pour into the channel. They used the boats as buckets, for this would give a larger draw of water each time. Overhead the sun burnt in a blazing fire and the sweat poured down their emaciated, brazen bodies. And yet, in spite of all their effort what had they received? Just a quarter of the normal crop, hardly enough for a couple of months after putting by the store of seed for the next year.

The men had worked and toiled in the hope of better times to follow. The men went on quarter rations while the women lived—only they knew how. Even the children starved. All day long, they would hang around their mothers asking for a little more food. What could the poor women do? They threw a handful of rice in a pail of water and boiled it till it turned into a thin gruel. This gruel—more water than rice—they gave to the children, but they were not satisfied and cried for more. Like skeletons, the men moved about, shadows of their former selves. They cursed their fate and called upon Allah to send them rain in time next year.

The next year was worse. The hungry, famished men moved about the fields, and worked with thin bony arms. There was some rain early in *Baisakh* and the farmers flocked to their fields in eager hope. They tilled their land with their weakened cattle and made it ready for the sowing, but there was no more rain and the earth grew dry and dusty again. As if to mock their misery, clouds showed in the sky only to disappear without a drop of rain. A strong west wind blew, hot and thirsty and dried up the little moisture there was in the atmosphere. Soon grass became scarce and the tired cattle drooped in the heat.

Some of the more reckless among the farmers killed and ate their cattle. 'For,' they argued, 'we have food neither for

the cattle nor for ourselves. The cattle will die in any case and perhaps we shall also die. Which is better? That we should eat our cattle and try to live ourselves, or that we should all perish together?'

Asgar Mia had not suffered so much in the first year. He was well-to-do and had reserves on which he could fall back. At least he had some money, and could purchase grain from distant quarters, but now he too suffered with the rest. In the first year, he had bought grain in the Dhuldi *hat*. This year the neighbouring villages also suffered from the draught. Merchants dared not bring grain from other districts lest the hungry men should loot their stores. One merchant, bolder than the rest and more avaricious, had tried to bring a boat-load of rice from the neighbouring district, but his boat never reached Dhuldi. Nobody knew what happened to him and his grain, but people noticed that for a few days the men in one of the riverside villages seemed to go about well-fed and satisfied.

And now it was the third year. Few people had any of their cattle left and yet the men, fighting against fate, sought to till their lands. They yoked themselves to their ploughs and wearily dragged them across the scorched earth. Their shrivelled arms and their withered shanks trembled with the effort and yet the plough hardly moved. Mechanically, they went on from early morning till the sun was too hot to allow anybody to stay in the fields. Many of them did not have the seed to sow. Perhaps, somewhere in their inner consciousness, they hoped that something would turn up, though if they were asked to say for what they hoped, they had no answer to give.

Men were anxious to sell their land for a bag of grain, but where were the buyers? Men wanted to sell their cups and plates, their cattle and their homesteads, and in some cases even their daughters and wives. In fact, everybody wanted to sell but nobody was willing to buy. People flocked to Asgar Mia's house, and pressed him to give them a handful of rice. He took them to his granary and opened the door: the granary was empty. They would not believe what they saw and

clamoured that he had secret stores. Quietly, Asgar Mia took off his shirt and showed to them his bare body: the ribs stood out and the stomach was empty like a cave. His figure was a skeleton of bones with hardly any flesh.

In spite of all his privations, Asgar Mia clung to a brace of bullocks, the last of his once large stock of cattle. For three years now, he had struggled hard. All his reserves had gone, his slender fund of money was exhausted, and he had at last suffered the slaughter of his stock. It was hard to see the suffering of these dumb creatures, for who would give them food when men starved? They had been gradually killed and now only a pair of bullocks—shrivelled with hunger and with the bones sticking out in their ribs—remained.

Asgar Mia looked at the sky again—as if he would by the very fervour of his desire force out of it unwilling drops of rain. He sadly shook his head—for where was there a trace of cloud in the speckless sky?

'Malek, Malek,' he called in a lifeless voice and Malek came out of the house. He was now a lad of fourteen or thereabouts, but the lack of food in the last few years had stunted his growth and he hardly looked his age. With pinched and drawn face and lanky arms that hung from his sides, it was difficult to imagine that he was the chubby boy we had met before. He came up to Asgar Mia and stood stolidly.

'Hardly a sign of rain yet,' said Asgar Mia in a dried voice. And then in a more interested tone he asked, 'Has Basir returned?'

'No,' replied Malek in the same listless tone.

'Not returned as yet?' said Asgar Mia. There was a slight touch of petulance in his voice. 'He is gone ten days or more, and he has not returned as yet?'

He looked expectantly at Malek, but the boy remained standing—silent and sullen. He seemed too hungry and weak for superfluous words.

'Why don't you say something, boy?' said Asgar Mia, half in regret and half in anger, and without another word, turned towards the village path where a strange procession was coming out.

Little Nuru—she had hardly grown since we saw her last—he was leading the procession. She had on her head an earthen pot, and the girls who followed her—there were only girls in the procession—had each a pot on her head. They were chanting in unison, but their voices were weak and frail, and the words they sang had hardly any life in them.

A bitter smile played on Asgar Mia's lips. 'Women's foolery,' he said half to himself.

Malek's face lit up for a moment as he saw Nuru, but it again turned into an ashen pallor. They are singing for rain,' he stubbornly said, as if in reply to Asgar Mia's comment.

'I know it, my boy,' said Asgar Mia, 'but what is the use of it? If incantations could have brought rain, we would have had rain these last three years. Why tire out the poor girls for nothing, especially when they have hardly enough to eat?'

He called to Nuru and she slowly heaved towards him. He took the earthen pot from her head and smashed it on the ground. The girls uttered a shriek of alarm and fear, but even their shriek was faint.

'There,' he said with a note of savagery in his voice, 'that is what I think of your chants for rain.' And then he continued in a gentler tone as he noticed the look of pain on Nuru's face: 'You are tired, my child, and have hardly enough to eat. You should not waste your energy in these futilities.'

'But father,' wailed Nuru, 'it may bring us ill-luck.'

'Don't worry, my child,' he said. 'These songs are useless. If they had been of any use, we would have had rain in the last two years. If they can do no good, they neither can do any harm.'

He put his arm round the child and gently drew her to him. She put her face on his chest and sobbed, a quiet gentle sob that was painful to see.

The other girls had in the meantime fled. They were afraid that Asgar Mia might smash their pots as well.

That night at last it rained. From the evening, clouds

began to collect. Men once more looked at the sky hopefully. Dark dense clouds they were—clouds charged with rain and lightning and thunder. A high wind arose from nowhere and the waters of the Padma could be heard moaning like a monster in pain. Dark shadows gathered on the waters and they grew sombre in the gathering darkness.

Suddenly a flash of lightning rent the sky. Blast followed blast in quick succession. Forked lightning lit up the sombre clouds and the sombre earth. The waters of the Padma quickened to a new life. From the parched earth rose a mist of dust. Columns of dust formed and were scattered by the wind. The thunder boomed and the deep reverberations woke echoes from the waters of the mighty river. The flashes became more and more frequent, till the whole sky looked like one blaze of light. Then came heavy drops of rain, at first slowly and intermittently but they seemed to gather strength and came down more and more swiftly. A cloud of dense vapour rose from the earth as it drank up the life-giving water. Men came out into the rain and lifted up their voice to Heaven in gratitude.

The rain continued the whole night. Pools formed upon the earth. The dust and the heat died down. But the rain did not stop. Without an intermission it rained for four days and nights. Just as the earth had thirsted for water, now she had more water than she wanted. The men who had welcomed the rain felt their joy turn to fear, the fear to anger, the anger to bitterness and despair as they saw the water rise on all sides. The tanks filled out, the fields were submerged and gradually the waters crept up towards their homesteads.

On the night of the fourth day, the rain grew in intensity. A strong wind blew from the east, churning the waters of the Padma till they burst the banks and overflowed the land. The water rose steadily and soon the houses were full of water. Men woke from their sleep to feel the cold waters lapping round their beds. Mothers hurriedly clasped their babies in their arms and rushed out to escape but where could they go? As far as eye could see in the blinding shower of rain, the land was one vast sheet of water. Only the trees stood out here

and there like islands in an inland sea. Houses were washed away. Those that withstood the first rush of the waters soon crumbled down. Men climbed on the roofs and sat shivering in the rain while the carcasses of dead cattle floated past. Those who could take to boats did so and shivered in the cold with their few belongings huddled at the bottom.

When morning broke at last, it was a strange and desolate world that the survivors saw. All familiar landmarks had been swept away. There was hardly any trace of the village. A few fallen-in roofs indicated where the houses had been. On the vast desolation of waters floated a few boats—black spots that were a pathetic symbol of man's insignificance before the elemental forces of nature.

In one of the boats huddled Nuru and her mother, and Malek and Asgar Mia. They had saved hardly any of their belongings, for theirs was one of the houses that suffered first. Asgar Mia stood up and looked around with blank despair.

'We suppose we must be grateful that we were able to escape with our lives,' he said bitterly. He cursed his fate and the day that he was born.

Nuru looked at her father. Her eyes were ringed with fear; her face looked pinched and small after the night's vigil and sufferings. Her mother was tired and lifeless and could hardly hold up her head.

Malek was tired and hungry. The weariness of his body was apparent, but still his eyes glowed with excitement. It was a tremendous experience—something that would live in his memory. He felt important and his youth would not let him despair.

'Don't worry, Asgar *chacha*,' he said, 'we shall build it up all again. You have told us how you came to this land with your bare hands and turned the waste into a garden. You have done it before you can do so again.'

Asgar Mia could not help a smile in spite of his weariness and the bitterness of his despair.

'You are young, Malek,' he said in a gentle voice. 'At your age, I feared nothing, but today, I am no longer young. The days that once are gone will never return.'

MEN AND RIVERS

He surveyed the ruins of his fortune. The Padma had hurled herself upon the bank. Her current now flowed over what had been his lands. His homestead was at the bottom of the river, while his cattle and ploughs, his stores and seed had all been swept away—who knew where?

‘We must give up our home here and seek our fortunes in some new land,’ he said at last in a sad grave tone.

Nuru’s mother looked up with a pained startled look, but said nothing.

Their boat gently drifted with the movement of the waters. Overhead, a brilliant sun shone in a cloudless sky.

PART III

Malek stood upon a small hill and looked across the sea. Several years had passed and he was now a young man of nineteen with the down of new beard upon his chin. The terrible flood which smashed his old home and drove him from his place of birth was now only a memory. Even the sufferings he had undergone were tinged with an element of pleasure in retrospect. What boy is there that does not love adventure? And Malek thought of his childhood and its strange vicissitudes with a deep and quiet pleasure. For he had triumphed over difficulties, he was in love, and he was loved in return.

With half-closed eyes Malek looked across the countless waves that flickered on the bosom of the sea. It was a calm morning and the light lit up the flecks of foam in this long moving line of the billows. In the distance showed a few sails that gleamed in the sunlight. A sea gull darted in and out of the field of vision but Malek was too happy and contented to make the effort to follow its flight.

He mused over the days of his past. Young in years, his life had been rich in experience. He could remember—vividly as if it was yesterday—the crocodile hunt of his childhood days. The faces of his father and his grandmother floated before his vision. A pang of sorrow shot through his heart as he thought how distant they had become to him today. His father was hardly more than a memory and even his grandmother was a shadowy figure looming through the mists of forgetfulness. He remembered more vividly his grandmother's death: how she had laid crumpled upon the bank of the mighty Padma.

Gulabi and Kulsum flitted through his imagination. Where were they now, he wondered! Were they alive at all? Or had they succumbed to the great havoc of the draught and the flood? The picture of Basir rose up in his memory: the tall old man who leaned on a staff was more at home on water than on land. His age would seem to drop from him the moment he held a helm in his hands. How he had loved the Padma—a cruel mistress who had repaid his love by taking him into her bosom.

Malek could remember vividly the days of the flood. How the skies had poured and the water rose till their home and their lands were all washed away. Poor Nuru—his whole be-

ing was suffused with pleasure as he thought of her—it was hard ordeal for a little girl of seven, but how bravely she had stood up in the midst of their sufferings. Malek remembered the weary and cheerless journey across the Padma. They had lost their all, and their only hope lay in Basir who had not yet returned from collecting the rents. Painfully and helplessly they crossed the river, only to hear that Basir had left on the evening of the great storm. Nothing had been heard of him since. He belonged to Padma and Padma had claimed her own.

A sigh of regret escaped Malek. He could remember the days that followed the flood—hungry days when the future was all uncertain and the present one long round of bitterness. They drifted from one place to another, but there was no room for them anywhere and nobody wanted them. Poor Nuru's mother grieved. She was not accustomed to hardship and the new nomadic life cut at the roots of her vitality. Never strong, she could not stand the strain and grew weaker and weaker. She became a complete invalid and could not rise from her bed. She would quietly lie down to weep and let the bitter tears make furrows in her hollow cheeks.

Malek's gloomy thoughts had a silver lining in the picture of little Nuru. How old was he when he first met her? He could hardly remember, for now his life was so entwined with hers that he could hardly think of a time when he had not known her. She could have been seven or eight at the most and yet, how she had mothered her sorrowing father! She became a little matron overnight and cooked for them and cleaned their floating home and slaved for them like a skilful little housewife.

Their darkest days were however almost over and their wanderings soon came to an end. Asgar Mia heard of Byanchar, a small island that had newly formed in the Bay near the confluence of the Padma with the sea. It was virgin soil and land could be had for the asking. There was no *nazar* for the zemindar and there was no rent to pay for years to come. On the contrary, even seed and cattle were provided free to attract settlers.

'That is the place for me,' said Asgar Mia, 'for I can begin

life anew among the unknown men and unfamiliar surroundings. Will you go with me Malek, or will you seek your fortune by yourself ?

Malek's reply could be easily foretold. He had slowly grown into the family and was now like a son to Asgar Mia.

'I will go wherever you go, Asgar *chacha*,' he said.

Like the last parting kick of a malignant fate, there was one blow still waiting for Asgar Mia. He brought his small family to Byanchar and made a small clearing in the forest where he built a hut. Poor Nuru's mother could not reconcile herself to the change in her fate. One morning she did not get up from her bed. Nuru called to her but she would not listen and Nuru flung herself upon her mother's body and wept as if her heart would break.

Across the years, the memory was still bitter to Malek, but today the morning was bright and he was young. With the young, sorrow drops off like water from the back of a duck. Otherwise how could man survive the weight of sorrow that is his lot ?

Malek smiled to himself as he thought of their early days in Byanchar. It was hard work, but there was joy in his heart. He would go out in the morning with Asgar Mia and clear and prepare the land for cultivation. It was a newly formed island. The forest was not dense, but an undergrowth of shrubs and young shoots of acacias already studded the land. From morning till late in the afternoon they would work, while Nuru would arrange household affairs and prepare their meals. When the sun was high overhead, she would bring their food and wait while they ate their meal. She would trudge home again with the plates and pots neatly piled upon her head, and the men would look at her till a tree on the road hid her from their view.

Asgar Mia's luck had turned again, and everything he touched prospered. His land yielded a bumper crop in the very first year, while the grass he cut in the forest-lands fetched a generous price. His house cost him nothing to build, for he brought posts from the forest and built the walls with reeds. The roof was made of grass that could be had for the asking,

MEN AND RIVERS

and the labour was his and Malek's and Nuru's.

So the years had passed and Asgar Mia had again grown into a prosperous farmer. Malek had prospered with him, for the lands were held jointly in their names. Their fields were large and they could no longer till the lands themselves. They employed farm-hands. Some of the men who had formerly worked for Asgar Mia found their way to Byanchar.

Inside the house, Nuru queened over all. Even Asgar Mia submitted to her gentle rule, and as for Malek, he would have laid down his life at her bidding.

A deep feeling of gratitude overwhelmed Malek as he stood on the hill by the sea shore and looked across the waves. 'Allah is merciful,' he said and slowly turned towards the house.

CHAPTER I

Nuru was sitting by herself in her room. She was now fifteen and the glory of her tropical youth proclaimed itself in every limb. She herself was conscious of her budding womanhood and so was everybody who came near her—except old Asgar Mia. He seemed to believe that she was still the young girl who had cared and tended him when her mother died. And so he treated her still as a young child—with affection and tenderness but with a touch of amusement that she should pretend to be a grown-up.

Everybody else noticed the change. Formerly, her laughter rang out on the smallest pretext and she felt delight in the very movement of her limbs. She loved to play pranks on everybody and would burst into shrill laughter when caught. Today, her movements were slow and hesitant, while her voice—almost unknown to her—grew soft and gentle like her soft rounded limbs. And her former lighthearted happiness had given place to a new sensitiveness which trembled into tears on the slightest pretext.

Nobody, however, had felt the change so much as Malek. His heart yearned with love for her, and between longing and shyness, he felt a strange diffidence whenever she came near. The days of their childhood affection had been unclouded and clear. Malek often wondered at himself when he remembered how casually he had then treated her. But now? Her slightest word and look had more meaning for him than he could tell. Then he had known how she would react, but now he was never sure. The tears glimmered in her eyes when he least expected them. At other times, a gentle smile hovered on her lips, but where had gone the loud and shrill laughter of the days when they were both carefree children?

Nuru was sitting in her room and looked out of the door at the bright autumn sky. It was harvest time and she was alone at home. The men were in the fields and the women too had gone out to help. The men reaped the golden corn and the women piled them into stacks. Nuru was sitting all

by herself, but she felt neither lonely nor sad. She looked at the rich autumn sky—a beautiful transparent blue that shimmered with light. Soft billows of clouds—white and spotless as spun flakes of snow—drifted across the sky. She loved to watch them drift, for they took strange shapes and dispersed before one knew. They held no threat of rain. Sometimes they were lit up with a blast of lightning but it was autumnal lightning devoid of thunder. Nuru looked at the sky and softly hummed a tune. Did she remember the words? No, but the tune was full of a strange melancholy and clung to her memory.

She was embroidering a quilt. It was made up of old saris sewn together. She covered its body with designs of her own. Black thread she had and red, and cleverly she intertwined them to depict patterns of her imagination. Here and there in the midst of the design, she embroidered pictures, but pictures were more difficult to sew. Besides, what could she draw upon for her pictures but her own life? The motifs were simple and the elements few: her father and her mother, Malek, herself and some of the men and women of her village.

She had embroidered one picture of her childhood. She was sitting on one side of her father while Malek sat on the other. Her mother was serving them with food. It made her shy whenever she had to sew a picture of Malek. Yet how could she depict her life if she left him out? So she had decided to make patterns instead. They were simpler to make, and looked better.

Though she was alone, she blushed a deep crimson as she suddenly remembered what the quilt was for. It was for her bridal and would be spread upon her bed on her nuptial night. Like all growing girls, she also dreamt of her marriage. Who would be her bridegroom? Malek? Her body shivered with shy pleasure at the thought. Soon she was disturbed by another thought. If her father wanted to marry her to somebody else? The prospect was full of terror, but then, her father loved her and he loved Malek also. Why should he do something that would ruin both their lives? What if Malek did not want to marry her? If he still looked on her as the

young girl she had been? There was a catch in her heart as she tried to fathom Malek's attitude. Had he not shown by a thousand little signs that he cared for her—perhaps even more than she cared for him? But no, that was impossible. How could any other human being love as she loved?

Her reverie was disturbed by the shadow of a man upon her quilt. She was startled, for she had heard no footsteps. Quickly she looked up and could hardly believe her eyes. As if in answer to her dreams, Malek was standing before her. He had stepped gently and she had been so taken up with her thoughts that she had not heard him approach. A faint smile played upon his lips and he held his hands behind him. Obviously he was hiding something from her.

'What is it?' she asked in a voice that trembled.

The shock and surprise had suffused her cheeks with crimson and her hesitancy made her the more beautiful in Malek's eyes.

'Guess,' he said in a voice full of suppressed merriment.

'How can I guess?' she said in a voice that was now steadier.

'Try, and if you succeed, I will give you something,' said Malek. His eyes were shining with joy.

'I can't guess and I don't want anything,' retorted Nuru.

But you will want it when you know what it is,' insisted Malek.

'You seem to know more about me than I do myself,' she said. Nuru pouted her lips but her eyes were smiling.

'Suppose I do?' returned Malek as he looked intently at her.

She lowered her eyes before his ardent gaze and blushed.

'Of course, I do and you know it yourself,' repeated Malek, and then, quite inconsequentially, he said, 'How beautiful you have grown, Nuru!'

Nuru blushed still more and the rich crimson spread to her neck and arms.

'How did you grow so beautiful, Nuru?' asked Malek in a deep tender voice.

Nuru seemed to have lost her power of speech. With lowered head and averted eyes, she began to bite her nails. The quilt on which she had been working dropped from her lap and fell to the ground. She stooped to pick it up, but

Malek was quicker. With one sweep of his arm he had picked it up and held it aloft.

'What is it, Nuru?' he asked. His voice was full of curiosity.

'Give it back to me,' said Nuru with flaming face.

'I will,' replied Malek with genuine surprise. 'Only tell me what it is.'

'I won't,' said Nuru and hid her face in her arms.

'But what is the harm if you tell me?' insisted Malek in perplexity.

'I won't,' said Nuru and made a sudden snatch at the quilt.

'And I won't give it back to you if you don't,' said Malek determinedly and lifted it up higher.

'Just as you please,' replied Nuru with a sudden attempt at dignity. 'I don't want it back.' She made as if she would go away.

Defeated, Malek touched her arm and said, 'All right, you win, Nuru. Take back your quilt,' and he dropped it on her.

Nuru's face clouded and the tears shimmered on her eyelashes. Malek did not know what to do or say.

'But what have I done?' he asked humbly.

Nuru did not reply but lifted her face towards him. Her eyes were brimful of tears but like sunshine after the rain, a smile flickered in their depth.

Malek forgot his question and could only stare at her.

'What are you staring at?' asked Nuru with the blush still crimsoning her face.

'You,' said Malek.

A couple of minutes passed. Earth and sky were held in a spell of silence. Light overflowed on all sides out of the blue depth of the sky. Suddenly the silence was broken by the call of birds from a grove nearby.

Startled, Nuru asked, 'Where is father?'

'In the fields, of course,' replied Malek, and added significantly, 'everybody is in the fields. There is nobody here but you and I.'

'Why did you come?' asked Nuru in a hushed voice.

'Why? Do you have to ask why?' asked Malek in reply.

'If anybody comes now and sees us ' Nuru could not complete her question.

'What of it?' replied Malek with a toss of his thick curls. 'We have grown up together and everybody knows that you are going to be my wife.'

The blush on Nuru's face deepened till it seemed as if it would burst into flames. Malek continued unconcernedly, 'Of course, there are a few fools who think we are brother and sister.'

Nuru lowered her head. It seemed as if a whole world's shyness weighed her down. In a voice that could scarcely be heard, she whispered, 'Please leave me, please go away.'

Malek's face turned deathly pale. In a voice that could hardly control its emotion, he asked, 'Don't you then care for me? Have I been a fool and imagined things?'

Nuru could not speak but gently shook her head.

'I can't understand, I don't understand,' repeated Malek in a voice frantic with pain. 'Do tell me Nuru if all my hopes are in vain?'

Still Nuru would not reply, nor would she lift up her face. Malek stood in front of her in an agony of suspense, and at last turned to go.

'So I know my fate,' he said in a voice that was dead and lifeless. 'Goodbye, Nuru, and I shall never trouble you again.'

Quickly Nuru lifted up her face. 'Don't go,' she said and though her voice was scarcely above a whisper, the words rang in Malek's ears and seemed to rise in volume till they filled the whole earth and sky. Full of astonished joy, he turned towards Nuru who lifted up her face towards him. No words were necessary, for her eyes spoke of her unutterable love for him. Perhaps it was only for a moment that she looked at him and quickly turned her eyes away. To Malek, they were like liquid stars that burnt into his consciousness and would never be effaced.

Full of a quiet and deep happiness, Malek stood looking at her for a moment and then he broke into a happy laugh.

'What a fool I am,' he laughed, and Nuru looked up in quick surprise.

In answer to her questioning look, he said, 'Just like me to forget why I came! But Nuru, you have made me happier than I have ever been before.'

Slowly he lifted up his hands and held before Nuru a chain made of sheafs of corn. The ripe corn shone like gold and cleverly he had pleated them to look like a necklace of seven strands.

'How beautiful,' exclaimed Nuru and smiled.

Malek smiled in return. 'It is for you,' he said and gently placed it on her neck.

Nuru bent down, touched his feet with her hand and then placed the hand upon her forehead. Before he could say a word, she had slipped away, but as she went into the room, she turned for a moment and smiled at him with joy and mischief dancing in her eyes.

Malek stood looking at her and as she disappeared, muttered, 'I must speak to Asgar *chacha*. I will, after this very harvest.'

CHAPTER II

The rich glow of afternoon covered earth and sky and lost itself in the distant sea. Asgar Mia was sitting alone in the porch of his house with a hookah in his hand and watching the men work. He rarely went to the fields now, for young Malek was his right hand man and could look after the work there. He would sit at home and muse over the past. Sometimes he would talk, and then what strange stories of struggle and success, of love and hatred he would tell.

The men felt his eyes on them and worked hard to please him. He was a kindly man, they knew, but he worked hard himself and did not like idlers. The men knew of his past struggles and respected him. Indeed, he was a venerable figure as he sat there. In the last few years he had aged. He still stood straight but his greying hair had turned white. His flowing white beard gave him a patriarchal look.

'Where is Malek?' he asked one of the men.

'He has not yet returned from the fields,' the man replied.

'The boy works too hard,' muttered Asgar Mia and slowly lifted himself up. The men stopped work for a moment to watch him. With a nod of his head, he ordered them to go on, and slowly walked into the inner house.

'Nuru, Nuru,' he called from near the door, and a young slender figure floated up to him. His eyes rested on her with affection and he gently patted her on the head.

'And what has my little mother been doing?' he asked in a voice of affectionate raillery.

'I have so many things to do,' replied Nuru with a slight toss of her head. She had lost none of the grace of childhood, and the bloom of youth added a rich softening to her mind.

'My little mother mustn't work too hard,' said her father with a twinkle in his eyes. 'She must rest in the afternoons.'

'But father, how can I rest when I have the work of the whole house to do? The men are working in the fields. I must see that they get their food in time. The maids are husking the rice—I must see that they husk enough for tonight's dinner and

tomorrow's breakfast. Also I have to cook something special for you every day. And then there is Malek bhai.' He is so absent-minded that he even forgets to eat if he is not reminded in time.'

There was the faintest suggestion of a blush as she spoke, or it might have been the glow of the afternoon sun upon her face. In any case, Asgar Mia was not aware of any change. Her words had started a new train of thought in his mind.

'Yes, yes, that is what I came for,' he said. 'I wanted to ask if Malek has had his meal today.'

'No, father,' replied Nuru. 'He has not returned as yet.'

'Yes, so I heard. But Nuru, this must stop. You must tell him to be more careful of his health. He is young now and does not mind these irregularities, but when he is of my age, he will be thankful if he has led a regular life.'

Asgar Mia turned to go out, but paused on the doorstep and came in again.

'Better send someone for him. It is already late and he should have his meal,' he said.

'Wouldn't it be better if *you* sent somebody?' suggested Nuru. She felt shy of asking anybody to go to the fields to call Malek. What would the men think? And might not Malek get annoyed?

'Of course, of course,' Asgar Mia interrupted her thoughts. 'It is just like me to ask you to send a woman to the fields.' He began to laugh and added, 'You must forgive the lapse of your old son. I am getting on in years and my memory is not what it was.'

'You have a better memory than most young men,' retorted Nuru with a smile.

Asgar Mia looked at her with pride and affection. 'Have Malek's meal ready,' he said as he went out. 'I am sending for him and he will be here soon.'

Asgar Mia went out and called one of the men working in the courtyard. 'Aziz,' he said, 'go to the fields and call Malek in. Tell him that I have sent for him.'

Aziz had come all the way to Byanchar to join Asgar Mia. Kulsum had borne him two sons in two years, and was pregnant again at the time of the great flood.

Insufficient food and repeated child-birth had weakened her frame and she could not stand the strain. She gave birth to a dead daughter on the night of the storm and within a few hours she herself was dead. His sons also died for want of care. Aziz went about distracted at the loss of wife and children. At last he heard of Asgar Mia in his new home, and there he had come, for he had nowhere else to go. He was half crazy with sorrow and loss and the terrible privations he had gone through in his wanderings. It seemed he could never realize that Kulsum was dead. He spoke of her as if she was waiting for him, and his talk wandered from the tasks of the moment to the brief happy days of his life with Kulsum. On only one point was his mind steady. He loved Malek with an almost insane love and was loyal to him to the point of death.

Aziz hurried to the fields, but Malek was not to be found. From field to field he went, but there was no trace of Malek. The men were working in the fields, and at last Aziz shouted to one of them, 'Have you seen Malek Mia?'

The man stopped his work for a moment and shouted back, 'He left us a little while ago, he said he was going home.'

Aziz hurried home but Malek had not returned. Asgar Mia was a little worried.

'This is very strange,' he said. 'If Malek left the fields to come home, he should have been here long ago.'

He asked Aziz to go once more and look for Malek. Again Aziz went to the fields and enquired in field after field. One of the men had some news. After supervising the work in the fields, Malek had taken a small boat. He had paddled down the stream that flowed by their farm and met the sea a couple of miles away. The man had thought nothing about it, for this was one of Malek's favourite pastimes. He would often go down and sit on the small hill that overlooked stream and sea. He would go at dawn and he would go at dusk. There was nothing he loved more than to watch the sun as it leapt out of the sea like a ball of fire or rested upon the waves before suddenly dipping into the sea and out of sight.

Aziz came back and told Asgar Mia that Malek had gone to the small hill by the sea. With a nod of his head, he added,

It is just like Malek Mia. Kulsum says that even when he was a child, he was full of pranks and would disappear from the house for hours. Once he took a boat and went out.'

Asgar Mia interrupted him and said, 'We know all your stories about Kulsum and Malek, but is this the time to go on a picnic? He has neither washed nor eaten, and the sun is already leaning towards the west.'

He called to the men, 'Hurry up, my brothers, hurry up. The sun is already inclining to the west and you know how short the winter evenings are. Darkness leaps at you almost before you know.'

The men nodded in assent and quickened the pace of the work. Asgar Mia took up his hookah and resumed his smoke. His glance fell on Aziz who was standing in silence.

'What's on your mind, Aziz?' he asked. He knew that this faithful old man never spared himself in work. He would not be standing by unless he had something on his mind.

'Shall I go to the hill and call Malek Mia?' asked Aziz.

'What for,' said Asgar Mia. 'There is nothing to fear in these islands.'

'It is getting on towards evening. Kulsum will be angry if I don't go and call Malek Mia,' replied Aziz.

'That may be so,' said Asgar Mia with a twinkle in his eye, 'but we are not as afraid of Kulsum as you. There must be some reason why Malek has gone. There are no wild animals in the island and there is nothing to fear.'

'But one never knows,' objected Aziz. 'Sometimes tigers and even elephants swim out to the island in search of food. What will Kulsum say if anything happens to Malek Mia?'

Asgar Mia began to laugh. 'You are getting potty with age, Aziz,' he said. 'We have lived here all these years and have never heard of even a wolf or leopard. Now you are thinking of tigers and elephants. Malek is no longer a child. He can take care of himself and may not like it if we interfere too much with his movements.'

Aziz did not reply but stood in sullen silence for a minute or two and then turned to go into the inner house.

'Aziz,' called Asgar Mia in a tone which had a touch of

sharpness in it. Surprised, Aziz stopped and looked towards Asgar Mia.

'Now, now,' said Asgar Mia in a more level voice, already a little ashamed of the sharpness of his tone, 'don't you go and frighten Nuru with your stories of elephants and tigers.'

'Old men and all women are alike in one respect,' he continued with a twinkle in his voice. 'They take fright at a straw and let their fancy create terror out of shadows.'

An old maidservant hurried out of the house and came up to Asgar Mia. 'Nuru Bibi is calling you,' she said.

Asgar Mia slowly raised up his huge shaggy frame. He cast a look half of anger and half of vexation at Aziz and slowly walked into the house.

'Where is Malek bhai?' asked Nuru breathlessly.

'Now, now,' said Asgar Mia in a tone meant to soothe her, 'don't get excited with old stories and baseless fears.'

Nuru's heart missed a beat. With a catch in her voice, she said, 'What stories are you referring to, father? I asked nothing about fear?'

Asgar Mia tried to cover up his mistake. 'I am not referring to any story, my child, but women are apt to imagine all kinds of things and that old fool Aziz . . .'

He tried to stop before it was too late; but Nuru, thoroughly frightened now, came up to him and placed her hand upon his knee. 'Don't try to hide anything from me father,' she said. 'What has happened to Malek bhai?'

Asgar Mia was annoyed with himself for his indiscretion and tried to cover it up by a show of irritation. 'Who told you that anything has happened to Malek? Why do you imagine things?' he asked.

'But what have I done, father?' pleaded Nuru. 'You told me to get Malek bhai's food ready and I did so. I waited and waited, there was no sign of him. You said you would send for him, but he did not come. I thought you had forgotten to send a man and so I sent for you.'

'That is all right, but why do you think I should forget so soon? Do you think your old father is in his dotage?' replied Asgar Mia in assumed playfulness. He wanted to divert her

attention, but she would not be deceived.

'So you did send someone and yet Malek bhai has not returned?' Nuru seemed to drag out the words painfully and with effort.

Asgar Mia silently nodded his head.

'Who did you send?' asked Nuru again.

'Aziz,' Asgar Mia replied curtly.

'And what does Aziz *chacha* say?' asked Nuru with eyes wide with fear.

'One should pay no attention to what the old fool says,' replied Asgar Mia with genuine irritation.

'But what does he say?' insisted Nuru. She put her arms round her father's knee and pleaded, 'Please tell me, father. Do, please.'

Almost against his will and grumbling to himself, Asgar Mia said, 'That old fool talks of elephants and tigers,' and quickly added as he saw Nuru turn pale, 'Don't be silly. He is always telling us what his Kulsum thinks. Nuru, whoever has heard of an elephant or a tiger in these islands?'

Nuru would not be consoled and began to weep. Between her sobs, she said, 'But father, one never knows. These are new islands and there may be animals of which we do not even know.'

Asgar Mia patted her on the head and said, 'Don't cry, my child. I am sending men to look for him. I am sure he has gone to the small hill by the sea where he so often spends his time.'

Nuru cast a grateful look at him through her tears and wiped her eyes.

'I will give him a talking to when he comes back,' continued Asgar Mia, 'and you also tell him to be more careful in the future.'

Nuru said nothing but her face brightened a little. The eyelashes were still wet with tears but the eyes shone like dark pools of light.

Asgar Mia patted her on the head and walked out of the room thoughtfully. In fact, he was getting anxious himself. The afternoon was now far advanced. The clear light of

the winter day was turning to mellow gold with approaching night.

Aziz was standing anxiously near the door.

'Shall I go to look for Malek Mia?' he eagerly asked as soon as he saw Asgar Mia.

Asgar Mia nodded in assent, and as Aziz started to go, added, 'Don't go alone. Better take a couple of men with you.'

Aziz called two men from the courtyard and went out. Asgar Mia looked after them as long as they could be seen, and when they went out of sight, slowly walked into the inner house. Nuru was standing where he had left her. Her face was pale, and the dark black of her hair increased the pallor of her face.

She looked up expectantly as she heard the sound of footsteps and her face lit up. When she saw her father alone, she turned an ashen grey and the tears welled up in her eyes.

'Don't worry, my child,' said Asgar Mia in a gentle voice. His words seemed to quicken her grief and the hot tears raced down her cheeks. Her slender body quivered with grief and she wept as if her heart would break.

Asgar Mia put an arm round her and patted her on the back.

'Don't weep, my child,' he said. 'I have sent Aziz and two other men to look for Malek. Soon he will be back, for these islands of ours are quite safe. Never has a wild beast killed anybody here and your brother will come back soon.'

After a couple of hours, Aziz returned with his two companions, but there was no trace of Malek. Nor had they found his boat. They had followed the stream till it met the sea, but Malek was nowhere to be found. They climbed the hillock and hallooed till they were hoarse. The only voice they heard was the echo mocking them from across the waves.

It was now getting dark. The broad beams of the setting sun touched to light the crest of the waves and were quenched in the depth of the sea. Only in the west glowed the dying embers of the day and a strange quietness descended upon the earth.

In Asgar Mia's house there was no peace. Now that the worst fears seemed to be justified, Asgar Mia grew silent and stern. Nuru also no longer wept but her face was heavy with the weight of unshed tears. Asgar Mia could hardly look at her—so sad and forlorn she looked.

He divided his men into groups and sent out several parties all over the island. They took with them torches and tin drums to frighten away any animals that might be lurking in the woods. The island was mapped out and each group was to search the part assigned to it. With half a dozen of his best men Asgar Mia himself took a boat. He said that he would round the island to search for Malek.

The search parties worked over the island all night long. A light winter mist rose in the uncertain light. There was no moon in the sky and the stars shone with pinpoints of light that could hardly relieve the gloom. As the men moved in the darkness, their torches shed a lurid light. Bizarre shadows darted about and the trees and shrubs had an unearthly aspect. In the stillness of the night, voices rang out as the men hallooed to one another and echo played strange tricks with the sound.

A black grey dawn saw the search parties return one by one. They were played out after their labour of the night. In the uncertain light, their faces looked haggard and there were signs of weariness round their eyes.

Inside the house, Nuru was sitting on the porch of her room. Her eyes were fixed in a brazen stare but she seemed neither to see nor hear what appeared around her. Once or twice, the women had offered to bring her food, but her strange silence was forbidding, and they dared not repeat the offer. At first they had conversed in low tones but now they sat in huddled silence.

Nuru started every time there were footsteps and voices to show that a search party had returned. Every time the voices died out. She relapsed into her stony silence and continued with her grim vigil. At last she heard her father's voice. He was saying something to the men outside but she could not catch the words. She leapt to her feet and started to go out, but near the door, she met her father. To her

MEN AND RIVERS

questioning look, he could only sadly shake his head. She crumpled down in a swoon at his feet.

CHAPTER III

There followed days of uncertainty and anxious waiting and fear. Every morning, Asgar Mia would go to the small hill by the sea and scan the horizon for a sign of sail or boat. He clung to the hope that Malek would soon return. His men went with him for a day or two, but as the days passed, the conviction grew on them that Malek was lost for good. They tried to dissuade Asgar Mia from his daily journey to the hill, but the old man was adamant. His temper had always been equable and he was not a man to be put out easily, but he would flare up if anybody suggested that Malek would not return. Only two other persons shared his faith. Nuru could not believe that any evil had befallen Malek. Every day she waited anxiously for her father's return from the hill. When the time for dinner came, she would lay Malek's plate beside that of her father, for she said, 'Suppose he comes back at meal-time, he would take it to heart if he did not find his place ready.'

The other person who never wavered in his faith was old Aziz. The farm-hands thought he was crazy. His suffering had indeed made him somewhat peculiar, but there was no question of his devotion to Asgar Mia, Nuru and Malek. He argued with those who doubted that Malek would not return; if anybody ventured to suggest that Malek was dead, Aziz was ready to smash his head. Possessed of uncommon strength which gossip had magnified many-fold, he was held in respect by everybody and the men were careful not to make him angry. When they found that any doubt about Malek's safety made him wild, they ceased referring to Malek when he was present. For themselves, they felt convinced that Malek was carried away by the sea and was dead or lost.

The days grew into weeks and at last the weeks grew to a month. Even old Asgar Mia began to lose heart and have doubts whether Malek would ever return. He did not yet give up his daily journey to the hill; it was obvious that it was more a matter of habit than conviction. At last, one morning

he confessed his doubts to Aziz and said it was useless to go to the hill any more.

Nuru was passing by and heard his remark. With eyes heavy with tears, she came up to her father and asked, 'Father, won't you go out this morning?'

Asgar Mia sadly shook his head. 'What is the use of going, my dear,' he asked in reply. 'I have been going every morning this month and more, but there is no sign of Malek. If he could, he would have returned by now.'

Nuru felt a cold shiver run down her spine. 'Do you think, father, that he will never return?' she asked in a breathless voice.

Startled by her tone, Asgar Mia looked up. He had been so engrossed by his own anxiety that he had hardly noticed how she had pined day by day. He seemed to see for the first time how wan and lifeless she had become. Her face was drawn with pain and had taken an ashen hue. Her slender figure seemed so frail that it hurt him to look at her.

'Come here Nuru,' he said and as she drew near, gathered her to him with one sweep of the arm. Nuru also nestled close to him; this mark of affection from her father was very dear to her in the midst of her sorrow. She hid her face in his arms and could not restrain her tears. Her whole body heaved and she sobbed as if her heart would break.

'Nuru, Nuru,' said Asgar Mia gently as he patted her on the head, 'don't cry like that, my dear. You mustn't take your father's words to heart. Of course Malek will return and return soon.'

Nuru's sobs did not stop.

Aziz looked grave and said, 'Let her have a good cry, *Panchayat*. She will feel better after a good cry. That's the way with women.'

Asgar Mia could not help a smile in spite of his distraction and said, 'Since when did you become wise about the ways of women, Aziz?'

Nothing abashed, Aziz replied, 'Since you made me marry Kulsum. She is wise, *Panchayat*, and she has lent me some of her wisdom.'

He seemed mightily amused at his own joke and burst out laughing. He made as if he wanted to say something to Nuru, but he could hardly stop his laughter.

After several attempts, he controlled himself sufficiently to say, 'Don't you weep, little mother. Malek Mia will surely return, for nothing can stop him. Kulsum says that he was a devil of a boy for mischief. She ought to know, for she reared him up after his father and grandmother died.'

Asgar Mia interrupted him, for he knew that once started on Kulsum, Aziz could go on for hours.

'Yes, of course,' he said. 'Whoever said that Malek will not return?'

Nuru's face lit up for a moment. 'You are trying to console me,' she said. 'I want to know the truth. Do tell me father if he will return? Do you really think so?'

Asgar Mia nodded his head silently but in his heart of hearts he had little hope.

To divert attention from their sorrow, he said, 'Run to the kitchen, Nuru, and make me some nice cream cakes. I haven't had them for such a long time.'

'I am going father,' she said. 'But won't you go to the hill this morning?'

'It is to the hill I am going, my dear,' said Asgar Mia. 'Start on your cakes now so that I can have them when I come back.'

Nuru cast a grateful look at her father and left for the kitchen. Asgar Mia turned to Aziz and said, 'Come with me to the hill, Aziz.'

They walked in silence for some time. Their path lay through the rich fields where the corn swayed with the wind. Harvesting was in full swing, but it was Asgar Mia's practice to start with the fields furthest from his home. Malek's disappearance had upset his time schedule, or else the reapers would by now have started on the neighbouring fields as well.

Slowly they left the fields behind on which Malek had last been seen.

Asgar Mia sighed as he reached the bank. 'May Allah soon bring back Malek in safety.'

Aziz said, 'Amen', and after a moment's pause added, 'If he is alive, he is sure to return, *Panchayat*. He can never remain away from Nuru Bibi for long.'

'Yes,' said Asgar Mia, 'the children are very fond of one another. And why should they not be? They have grown up together and are like children of the same parents. Nuru has taken his departure very much to heart.'

'It is not surprising that Nuru Bibi should take his absence to heart,' agreed Aziz. 'Kulsum says what a fine pair they will make—it seems that Allah made them for one another.'

'What are you talking about?' Asgar Mia interrupted him angrily. 'They are like brother and sister, I say, and they have always been treated as such.'

'No, *Panchayat*,' said Aziz as he wisely shook his head. 'You may have thought of them as brother and sister, but I am sure they don't themselves think so. Kulsum—'

Asgar Mia lost his temper. 'You are growing more and more potty every day,' he burst out. 'Can't you stop trotting out Kulsum on the slightest pretext? Malek and Nuru are like brother and sister, and only a fool could think otherwise.'

Aziz looked deeply grieved. He said in an humble tone, 'I will not say anything. But you are mistaken if you think that Nuru is sorrowing for a brother. Just look at her—how pale and frail she has become in these few days?'

Asgar Mia snorted in contempt. 'Can't a sister sorrow for her brother? And whoever has heard that a sister's grief cannot make her pale?'

Aziz replied doggedly, 'I won't argue with you, *Panchayat*, but Nuru Bibi is sorrowing for a lover—not for a brother. And Kulsum—'

Asgar Mia made a gesture of impatience but Aziz would not stop.

'Please listen to me,' he said. 'I have heard from Kulsum that when Malek first came to live in your house, this was what she and Basir had in mind. Even then Nuru Bibi and Malek were great friends and they hoped that if they lived together, perhaps you would consent to their marriage. Why else should they bring Malek Mia—who was the son of your greatest enemy

—to live with you ?' he added as if to clinch the argument.

Asgar Mia did not reply and suddenly became grave and thoughtful. He tried to remember past incidents that would confirm or dispel his doubts. Old Aziz's words had suggested to him thoughts he had never had before. He had seen Malek and Nuru grow up before his eyes. He had treated them as if they were his own children. So had his wife, and it had never entered his mind that the children might have any other thoughts. And yet, now that Aziz had made the suggestion, many incidents occurred to him to deepen his doubt.

He suddenly remembered that Nuru would hardly ever speak to Malek directly, and yet whatever she said contained a reference to him. He also remembered her care in preparing dishes that Malek liked. Last year, when he had sent Malek to pay the rent of his lands, he remembered how anxious Nuru had been. She had said nothing, but concern and anxiety were evident in all her words and actions. He remembered how she had flushed when Malek came back unexpectedly a day before he was due. He also remembered how she had swooned when she heard of Malek's disappearance and how day by day she was growing wan and pale. Almost before his eyes, she was withering with grief.

All these he had noticed, but he had read in them the signs of a deep sisterly affection. Nuru was affectionate by nature—there was no question about it. Everyone who came into contact with her was impressed by her sweetness and charm. How should he know that what he had taken to be the affection of a sister for her brother was in fact the growing passion between two young creatures who loved and desired one another ?

'I have been a fool,' he cried out in bitterness, half aloud and half to himself.

Aziz pricked his ears. Did he hear aright ? The *Panchayat* was not a man who easily gave vent to his feelings, but was he not cursing himself now ?

'What did you say, *Panchayat* ?' he asked.

Asgar Mia was already ashamed of his momentary loss of self-control.

MEN AND RIVERS

'I said that you are a fool,' he said in grim humour.

Nothing ashamed, Aziz replied, 'Of course I am a fool and I know it, but there are others who are fools and don't know it.'

'What do you mean?' asked Asgar Mia as he turned towards him angrily.

'Nothing,' replied Aziz with a bland smile. 'I am a fool and nobody pays any attention to what I say. Kulsum says

'You are intolerable with your Kulsum,' said Asgar Mia impatiently.

'But Kulsum is wise and she is not a fool,' doggedly continued Aziz, 'and Kulsum says that I should never speak unless I am spoken to.'

'For once she was right,' said Asgar Mia. 'It shows that she had more sense than I thought.'

'You are right, *Panchayat*,' Aziz beamed with pleasure. 'She has more sense in her little finger than I have in my whole body.'

In spite of his irritation, Asgar Mia could not help smiling again.

'You are a good fellow,' he said, 'but you don't know when to talk and when to keep quiet.'

'That is exactly what Kulsum says,' said Aziz as if this finally settled the matter.

The two men continued in silence for a few minutes. Now they were almost upon the sea. * Already through the tree tops, the vast expanse of the sea could be felt. The cool breeze played upon their brow and the sound of the sea could be distinctly heard.

Suddenly Aziz asked, 'You don't want Nuru Bibi and Malek to marry?'

Asgar Mia flared up. 'When will you get some sense into your dull brain? Why do you keep on repeating something that is absurd and impossible?'

Aziz would not be stopped so easily.

'Why should it be absurd and impossible, *Panchayat*?' he insisted. 'Is it because Malek Mia is Nazu Mia's son and

Nazu Mia was your enemy ?'

'Nazu Mia has nothing to do with it, and in any case Nazu Mia is dead.' Asgar Mia was obviously struggling to keep his temper.

He repeated sharply, 'Asgar Mia has no enmity with the dead. But I tell you Aziz, what you say cannot be and the less you talk of such matters, the better for everybody.'

'I am not the only one to think so, *Panchayat*,' replied Aziz. 'I am sure even Nuru Bibi and Malek Mia think like me.'

Asgar Mia turned upon him in such rage that Aziz was amazed and drew back.

'For your sake I hope that you have never spoken of this to Nuru,' said Asgar Mia in a voice full of threat.

'Why should I say anything to Nuru Bibi ?' protested Aziz. After a moment he added, 'But you have not told me why they should not marry.'

'Must I give an explanation to you of what I think or do ? I say it shall not be and that ought to be enough for you,' said Asgar Mia with an air of finality.

Aziz nodded his head uncertainly but dared not say anything more. Asgar Mia sank into deep thought and they walked quickly towards the hill. They scanned the horizon and suddenly Aziz began to leap with joy.

'A sail, a sail,' he cried.

'Where is it, where ?' asked Asgar Mia as he gazed intently into the sea.

Soon there was no shadow of a doubt. The sails gleamed in the sun and the sound of songs could be heard. The boatmen were singing *sari* songs ; their clear voices came ringing across the water.

'Allah be praised, for they are at any rate friends,' said Asgar Mia with a sigh of relief.

The figures could not be discerned. They looked like bronze statues against the bright sunlight. One figure was standing on the prow and wildly waved its hands as it saw Asgar Mia and Aziz standing on the hill-top.

'It is Malek Mia,' shouted Aziz in excitement. Malek leapt into the water and waded swiftly towards the shore.

CHAPTER IV

It was a day of rejoicing in Asgar Mia's house. In fact it was a day of rejoicing for the whole island. Soon the news spread that Malek had returned and people flocked to Asgar Mia's house to see him. Stories were also spread—most of them wild and fantastic—of his exploits and adventures. Young children looked at him with wonder and admiration, for in their eyes he was a hero who had returned from a strange and distant land.

Asgar Mia was happy. Joy beamed out of his face, but perhaps even he was not so happy as Aziz. As soon as Malek had leapt into the water, he also jumped in. He clasped Malek to his heart, and though he was now a hefty young man, lifted him up as if he were still a child and hugged him to his heart. He would have carried him ashore if Malek had let him, but smilingly he disengaged himself and walked up to Asgar Mia. He knelt before the old man and touched his feet with both hands and raised them to his forehead. Asgar Mia stooped down and lifted him up in a close embrace. He did not speak but there were tears in his eyes.

Aziz was standing by. As soon as Malek had saluted Asgar Mia, he embraced Malek once again. He was not content with embracing Malek alone, he ran up to the boatmen who had rowed him across and embraced them as well. In fact he embraced everybody he could lay hands on and embraced even old Asgar Mia. The old man submitted to his embrace and said, 'For once, your Kulsum has proved a truer prophet than many of us.'

Beaming with joy, Aziz returned, 'No, *Panchayat*, you do her wrong. Kulsum is always right. It is we who are wrong.'

Asgar Mia arranged a feast in honour of Malek's return. The boatmen were glad to stay for the day. They were treated as honoured guests and a fattened calf was killed for

them. The fish of the bay were fried and served with hot burning sauce. Nuru cooked for her lover and prepared chicken curry and thickened milk, but to her disappointment, she could not serve food to him. He sat to dinner with the guests in the courtyard. All she could do was to find pretexts to go to her own room and look at him from a window there.

There were no tables and meals were served on the floor on long thin strips of cloth. The men squatted on the mats and plates were placed before them on the eating cloths. There were not enough plates for all and some of the less important guests had to eat from banana leaves. When everybody was seated, one man brought a large bowl of salt and served a portion to every diner. Then came hot steaming rice and meat cooked in pulses. This was followed by fried fish and curried fish and the meal concluded with *semai* cooked in cream and milk. The men ate with gusto, for such feasts were rare and Asgar Mia had provided food that was exceptionally good.

After the feast was over, the cloths were rolled up and the place cleared. Men huddled together to listen to Malek's story. Asgar Mia called for his hookah and ordered that hookahs should also be handed round to the guests.

He turned to Malek and said, 'Let us have your story now.'

'You did make us all anxious, Malek,' he added after a moment's pause.

Malek hesitated. He wanted that Nuru should also hear the story.

Asgar Mia noticed his hesitation and guessed the reason. 'Why are you hesitating?' he asked.

'Wouldn't it be better if I told you the story more at leisure tonight?' he suggested half-heartedly.

'How can that be?' objected Asgar Mia. 'All the men want to hear your story. They can't wait till night and besides, who is going to feed them then?' he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Still Malek hesitated, but the men clamoured that he should begin his story.

'Now, now,' said Asgar Mia, 'all these men want to hear

your story and you should not disappoint them. Besides, these fishermen have brought you back to us; they would also like to hear your story.'

'But they have already heard it all,' protested Malek.

'Don't be childish, Malek,' said Asgar Mia. 'There was just a touch of impatience in his voice. 'All these men have come to see and hear you because they are fond of you.'

Aziz was standing by. He stooped and whispered in Malek's ears, 'You want to tell the story first to Nuru Bibi? Isn't it? She is standing behind the window. If you tell your story aloud, she can hear you.'

Malek looked at him gratefully and cast a quick glance at the window. A faint movement near the screen told him that Nuru was standing there, waiting to hear his story.

Asgar Mia noticed the whispering and the look in Malek's eyes. He glowered at Aziz and turned to Malek.

'We are all waiting for your story,' he said.

Malek shifted a little uneasily in his seat. Everybody was looking at him. He felt uncomfortable under the gaze of so many eyes. He had imagined a different setting for his story. Asgar Mia and Nuru would be his only audience. Asgar Mia would puff at his hookah and close his eyes in contentment. Nuru's eyes would shine like stars and pour on him the benediction of her love. Instead, he now faced a crowd of men who had suddenly become strangers to him.

With a cough in his throat, Malek began, 'I think it is just a month and ten days today that I went to the fields one fine autumn morning. The sun was bright and the harvest was almost ready. Reaping had started in some of the fields; it was my job to see that no corn was left standing. I went through the fields and everywhere the men were working well. Our men are willing workers. They love to work for Asgar *chacha*, for he is kind and pays well, but also demands from every man his due share of toil.'

The men smiled at the remark and Asgar Mia also could not but smile.

Malek continued, 'When I found that everyone was working well, I thought I could take the small boat and go down

the stream to the hillock by the sea. That is a place I have always loved and it has become sacred to me ever since *chachee-amma* was buried there,' he added in explanation and cast a quick glance at Nuru's window. A flutter in the screened window showed him that Nuru had heard him. He turned to Asgar Mia who was sitting with closed eyes and gently nodded his head in agreement. Reference to his wife always moved him and he was afraid of showing his emotion before so many men.

Malek went on: 'As I neared the sea, I felt the current carrying the boat out to sea. I did not mind, for I had paddles with me and could come back when I wanted to. Often I have done so in the past and did not doubt that I could do so again. As I came out into the open sea, I suddenly noticed two or three sails—a very unusual thing at that time of the day. The fishermen come out in the early hours of the morning and take their catch; they are gone before the sun has mounted a quarter of the sky. Isn't that so, my brothers?' he asked of the fishermen sitting by.

'That's right, brother,' replied an elderly fisherman with a nod of his head. 'We must make our catch before the sun has leapt out of the sea. Once the sun has started to climb the sky, the fish retires to the depths and will not come up again till evening.'

Malek smiled at him and continued with his story. 'I saw the sails and wondered in my mind who the men could be. I thought that it might be some fishermen who had failed to make a good catch and were staying in the hope of getting more fish, but I was wrong.'

'If you had been a fisherman, you would have known that a fisherman never casts his net in the sea once the sun has mounted up the sky,' the old fisherman remarked. The men drew nearer one another and the atmosphere grew tense, for they felt that they were approaching one of the crisis of the story.

Malek felt their interest and began after a short pause: 'I thought they were fishermen,' he said, 'and started to paddle towards them. Asgar *chacha* is fond of sea fish and

I wanted to bring some for him. I had paddled for about half a mile and the trees on the shore were already looking small when I suddenly noticed one of the ships move. Are they going away?—I wondered. I had little time to wonder, for the ship was now moving fast towards me. Soon its outline was clear and I realized that it was not a fisherman's boat. Its sides were high and had oars fixed to them. It could sail with the wind or be rowed at will. I was intrigued and did not know what to make of it for I had never seen such ships before. Soon my doubts were set at rest, for a boat was launched out of the ship and rowed towards me. I could see the men straining at the oars while half-a-dozen stood in the centre. Their hands were raised and I caught the glint of steel from the spears they held. I felt somewhat afraid and turned the head of my boat towards the shore. Before I had made two strokes with my paddle, I heard a great shout raised from the boat. I could catch only one word, "Stop". This only made me paddle the faster, but what could I do alone against a boat rowed by many hands? It drew nearer and again I heard them shout at me. "Stop", they were saying, "or else we will shoot you dead." That very moment a spear struck my boat which winced like a wounded animal. I saw it was useless trying to escape and stopped paddling. In a couple of minutes, they drew near and one of the men jumped into my boat with uplifted spear.

'Who were they?' eagerly interrupted one of the men, 'Were they the dread *harmads* who roam the seas?'

Malek smiled as he shook his head. 'Could I have been here talking to you if they had been *harmads*? Don't you know these pests of the sea? They come across the *kalapani* and know neither pity nor fear. They spare neither themselves nor their enemies. How could I have escaped if they had been *harmads*?' he countered the question by a series of questions of his own.

'Don't pay any attention to foolish questions,' gravely remarked Aziz. 'We want to know what happened to you then.'

Malek continued with his story: 'No, they were not

harmads but mugs from Arakan. One man, however, might have been a *harmad*. His body was white like chalk and his hair was red like *henna*. The leader was however a mug and it was he who leaped into my boat. He was a huge fellow. I am not small myself, but I looked a pigmy by his side. He had no eyes but slits through which yellow eyeballs shone like those of a cat. His hair was black and straight and he had neither beard nor moustache. His yellow body was bare and there was no hair on it. The muscles rippled on it like billows on the sea. I was so taken aback that I could only stare at him as if he was a creature from another world.

"What are you staring at?" he barked at me. His voice was harsh and grating and the language he spoke was like ours and yet peculiar. I could understand him but he spoke with an accent that made familiar words sound strange and alien.

"Who are you?" he asked again in a harsh grating voice and lifted me up with one arm as if I was a mere child. He dropped me into their boat and tied my boat to theirs. Then he vaulted back into his boat and ordered the men to row.

The boat started on its journey back to the ship. I was dazed and speechless and lay like a log at the bottom of the boat. They paid no attention to me till we reached the ship. The leader kicked at me with his foot and swore at me. "Get up," he commanded and I sat up. "Stand up and get into the ship," he ordered in a sharper tone and as I climbed into the ship, he kept kicking me from behind.

"Why do you kick me for nothing?" I protested. In reply he only burst out into a rasping laugh and kicked me once more.

"Don't kick me," I said. He swore at me again. "The rascal is trying to show his temper," he cried and turning towards me, he said, "Do you know what I do with anybody who displeases me?" He said this in such a wild and cruel tone and the look on his face was so sinister that I felt my blood curdle, but I was desperate and did not care. Evidently they were pirates. I had fallen into their clutches and had little hope of escape. They would take me to some foreign land and sell me as a slave or they might kill me. In either

case, my life was ruined. I would never see Byanchar again and all those for whom I cared. My whole life passed before me in a flash. I saw the houses and the fields and I saw the men who had been my friends. I thought of Asgar *chacha* and how sorry he would be to lose me like this. I felt that a quick end would be much better than the slow death of a slave in a distant land.

I turned to the robber and said, "I don't know you and I don't care. You can do your worst."

The robber swore at me again, but to the amazement of his men he did not kick or strike me. Instead, he ordered one of his men to tie my hands behind my back and walked away.

After a few minutes he returned. He was holding a piece of red-hot iron on a pincer and placed it in front of me. He brought it so close that I felt the heat on my face. I had however made up my mind to die and did not wince. This seemed to please him. With a short laugh, he moved the iron away and placed it on a plate on the floor of the ship.

He turned to me and said half grudgingly. "You seem to be a plucky boy and I think I shall not kill you. I will take you in my crew." I did not reply and kept looking at him. He began again. "Now answer me straight and true, and no harm shall befall you. If you tell a lie . . ."—he made a threatening gesture and pointed to the glowing iron.

"What do you want from me?" I asked sullenly.

The robber said, "First tell me who you are and what is the name of that island. Then tell me if there be money and women there, and if so, what are the men of the island like."

My heart was heavy but my mind worked with lightning speed. If I refused to speak, they would torture me to death and then they would attack the island. If they did attack—I could hardly bear to think of the consequences. The picture of burning houses, men killed and worse than death befalling the women, filled my imagination. I put on a bold face and said, "Don't you know the name of that island? And of the man who lives there? Haven't you heard of Asgar Mia, the famous swordsman who killed Ormuz the *harmad*? If you want to know, this is Byanchar, the village of Asgar Mia and

his band of fighters. Women and children there are none in the village, for they have their homes on the mainland and keep their families there. Here they come only during summer and stay till autumn. I also am one of Asgar Mia's men. If you don't believe me, I can take you to the village myself, but I can assure you that not one mother's son among you will return."

The robber looked at me as if he would pierce into my heart but I did not flinch. He broke into a mirthless laugh as he said, "Well, you be a good braggart, no doubt. Who is this Asgar Mia that he shall stand up against Mang Po and his band of sea rovers?"

'Mang Po!' muttered the assembled men and with white drawn faces drew closer to the speaker.

'Mang Po!' exclaimed Asgar Mia, and after a moment's pause, added, 'Allah be praised that you have returned safely from that devil's den.'

'Yes, Mang Po,' said Malek, as he noticed the terror on their faces. Quickly he looked at Nuru's window and said, 'I too felt a shiver of terror run down my spine as I heard the name. But I also felt that I must put up a brave face and at any cost turn his thoughts away from Byanchar.'

Mang Po was watching me closely. I put on as brave a face as I could and said, "What of it if you are Mang Po? We have heard of you and heard that you attack old men and defenceless women, but where there is a fight, you run away. If you want a fight, come to Byanchar and you shall have your bellyful."

I laughed as if the idea amused me and stared at Mang Po. He stared back at me. For perhaps a minute we stared at one another. Then Mang Po turned round and asked one of his men quickly, "Well, what do you think of it?"

The men replied, "Doesn't sound well, *Sardar*, for after all this fellow is also one of Asgar Mia's men. If he can brag like this while a captive, the others may prove a difficult nut to crack. And what do we gain after all this fight: neither gold nor women, for this fellow says that the women are on the mainland and the harvest not yet sold. No, *Sardar*, this

doesn't sound a good proposition."

They were talking in a low voice, but danger had sharpened my senses and I could hear their words. I gave a loud raucous laugh and said, "Well, Mang Po, why are you delaying? Let us go to Byanchar and you will have the fine feast that Asgar Mia has made ready for you. After all, why do you think I came out into the sea?"

Mang Po turned upon me furiously, "Stop babbling or I shall put an end to your chatter for good. Don't speak unless spoken to," and he turned to his companions again. Together they conferred for a few minutes and then Mang Po came back to me.

"How are we to know that you are not lying? Can it be possible that the island has neither gold nor women?"

"Who asks you to believe me?" I replied angrily. "I am telling you to go to the island and then—well then, I shall not be your prisoner for long."

I added with a touch of malice, "You may be mine and I shall show you how to treat a prisoner."

My temper seemed to convince them. Soon after I noticed that sails were spread and the ship began to move. Tears came to my eyes as I saw the island fade into the horizon. I felt I was leaving behind my happiness and joy, my hopes and fears, in fact my life itself. But what could I do? My hands were tied behind my back and they had chained my feet to the hull. I could only move about a few steps at a time. I gazed at Byanchar as long as I could see the faintest line in the horizon. Finally it disappeared behind the waves and I could see only the cruel waters leaping towards the sky.

Towards dark, they unloosened one of my arms and gave me some coarse bread and thin gruel. I was fainting with hunger and devoured it as fast as I could. During the meal, Mang Po came and watched me eat. Suddenly he put out his hand, and almost instinctively I shrank back.

"Good," he laughed. "A hero like you is afraid of my bare hands," he added sarcastically.

I did not reply, for what could I say? I was in his power and he could do anything he liked. He watched me

eating silently and again put out his hand. This time I did not shrink. He caught hold of my free arm and felt the muscles. For a moment I had a wild impulse of hitting him, but I remembered that my feet were chained and even my other arm was not free. Besides his grasp was like a vice and I could feel my bones ache.

"Good," he laughed again his raucous laugh. "These are good muscles and with proper training will grow as strong as steel."

Finally he turned to me and said, "Young man, I have taken a fancy to you, otherwise you would never have received this treatment. I take no prisoners; prisoners mean food and men to look after them. It is much simpler to throw them to the sharks. Sometimes, when I get a very hefty fellow, I chain him to the galleys and make him to pull the oars. Bless your luck that I have done neither with you yet."

He paused as if to let the words sink into my mind. After a moment, he began, "I am going to make you an offer. It is not often I do that. If you agree, good, if not, you may still provide food for the sharks." He laughed his cruel laugh. The sound of his laughter was more terrifying than his curses and shouts.

"Well, you don't seem anxious to know your fate?" he asked, after a brief interval.

I looked him straight in the face.

"I have no hope," I said, "and therefore I have no fear. I was a farmer and even this morning I was my own master; now I am in your hands and the worst you can do is to kill me. Why then should I be anxious?"

Mang Po broke into his peculiar laugh. "Well, I must say I like your spirit, boy. That is why I am going to make you an offer I have never made to a captive. Will you join our band?"

I was taken aback for a moment. I had expected many things but I had never thought that Mang Po would ask me to join his band of robbers. I did not know what to reply and kept quiet.

"Why are you silent?" asked Mang Po impatiently. "Don't

forget that it is a special kindness I am doing to you. If I change my mind, you may rue the day you were born."

I realized how dangerous it would be to refuse and yet my whole being revolted against the idea of turning a robber. I had said before that I did not fear death, but now suddenly I realized how very dear life was. I thought that if I lived, I might perhaps return to Byanchar some day. If I died, well, I could be dead. And yet to buy life at the cost of honour! To live the dishonoured life of a robber? How could I ever return to Byanchar if I once joined a robber's band?

Mang Po's voice interrupted my thoughts. "I will make up your mind for you if you can't," he said with a sneer. The threat in his voice was obvious and almost instinctively I decided to play for life.

"Please have patience with me, *Sardar*," I said in as humble a voice as I could, "and give me a little time to think. I am a poor villager and have never in my wildest thoughts dreamt of joining a robber band."

"Who says we are a robber band?" sharply said Mang Po. "We are not robbers but rovers of the sea. We recognize no law but our own. We take what our right hand can win for us, and it is only cowards and poltroons that call us robbers and pirates."

"Then you see, *Sardar*," I replied, "how different are our two points of view. I have been taught to obey the King's law and submit. You recognize no law but your own. Please give me a little time to think and decide."

"I don't know what has happened to me. I am unlike myself and feel kindly towards you," grumbled Mang Po. "But if your decision does not please me, you know the consequences."

Abruptly he left me and I sank into unpleasant thoughts. It was now getting dark. The sun rested upon the waves. In my mind's eye I could see the men returning home in the falling evening light. I could see the lamps lit in the cottages of Byanchar. For me cruel fate had ordained separation from those I loved and a cruel ignominious death.

Malek stopped and sighed. His audience sighed

in sympathy and he cast a furtive glance at Nuru's window. In spite of the curtain he could feel her presence. He could feel her sorrow as she listened to his tale of suffering.

After a short pause, he started again: 'It was perhaps the longest night in my life. Sleep deserted me on that evil night. I could feel the weary moments drag heavily. I watched the procession of stars moving silently across the sky. They seemed to shine with a cruel brilliance. The night was clear and the wind keen.

I saw the light change. Slowly almost imperceptibly, it began to grow brighter. The eastern sky gleamed with the coming sun. To me it was the presentiment of greater evil to come.

'Everyone on earth is now asleep—even thieves and robbers know rest,' I cried to myself, 'but for me there is neither sleep nor rest.'

Light shot through the sky and the waves of the sea shone like quicksilver. A low breeze broke out with the dawn. To my imagination it seemed that it was a sigh reaching after me from the beloved shores of Byanchar.

I must have fallen into a dazed sleep out of sheer weariness and despair. As I became conscious again, I felt terrible aches in all my body and my eyes burnt as if they were on fire. A strange dizziness possessed me and I felt an uncontrollable desire to shout and sing. I must have broken out into a shout, for I have a shadowy remembrance of black figures looming up in front of me. Someone pricked me in the ribs and I could hear him say, "The fellow must be dying. His body burns one's fingers," and I lost consciousness.

I do not know how long I was unconscious but it must have been for several days. When I came to my senses again, I was lying on a rough bed inside a cabin. Even my voice had so changed that I could not recognize it myself. I felt a burning thirst but my parched tongue could hardly frame a sound. I felt I would die of thirst but after a few moments, somebody came in and stood by my bed. It was Mang Po and he smiled on seeing me awake.

"So you have come to, my son," he said and there was a

MEN AND RIVERS

gentleness in his voice that surprised me. I smiled faintly in reply and said in a weak faltering tone, "Water". He stooped down and poured some water from a pitcher and gave it to me. I was so weak that I could not raise and the cup shook in my hands. Without a word, he put an arm round me and lifted me to a sitting posture and held the cup to my lips. I drank avidly and never have I enjoyed a cup of water more. I felt life pouring back into me and suddenly I remembered my plight. A deep sigh escaped me and I sank back into bed in weariness and despair.

Mang Po looked at me for a few moments and asked, "Better?" I nodded my head in reply and he arranged my pillow to make me more comfortable. I must say that these rough and cruel robbers treated me with a gentleness and delicacy I had never expected from them. But for my illness I would have thought of them as savage beasts. My illness showed me a side of their nature that makes it impossible for me to think too harshly of them.

The days passed for me in utter weariness of spirit. It was a sad and dreary convalescence. As I lay on my bed of pain, thoughts of my past and future haunted me. I surveyed my whole life and bitter thoughts swept over me.

"How can Allah be merciful," I used to think, "when He has only meted to me sorrow and despair? What have I done to Him that He should make me suffer so? I never saw my mother. I heard she died when I was an infant. I did not feel the loss; my father was both father and mother to me. My granny sheltered me with all her love and affection. Even this was denied to me. In quick succession I lost both of them in tragic circumstances. A stranger who had been my father's enemy gave me shelter. In Asgar *chacha's* house I found a new home. He was like a father to me and I found a mother and a sister as well. But this was too much for cruel fate. One night rain and storm again destroyed my haven of happiness. In Byanchar, we built up a new home against infinite odds and life was opening out brighter prospects to me when out of the blue this cruel bolt again fell on me. Surely, I have a right to complain, for even robbers have been kind to me, but not

Allah " These and other bitter thoughts assailed me till at times I feared for my sanity.

So the weary days and nights dragged. Slowly I gathered strength, but my progress was slow. I had little to hope for and had no desire to live. The robbers grew impatient and wanted to throw me overboard, but Mang Po would not hear of it.

One afternoon, I was lying in a half dozen state. Mang Po came to the bedside with two of his men. Thinking I was asleep, he turned to go. I have said they had a *harmad* among them. It was the *harmad* who was swearing. He made a gesture of impatience.

"I don't know what has happened to you, *Sardar*," he said, "but you have never shown such weakness before. You take a man and tell us that he will join our band. Good. He falls ill and you nurse him as if he were your son. Why? Aren't there other men in the world? Can we afford to carry a sick man with us wherever we go? Is a sea-rover's boat a hospital?"

I was only half-asleep and could hear him distinctly. At first I had not paid much attention, but as the talk centred round me, I grew a little curious. What would Mang Po say, I wondered. Strangely enough, I did not feel any fear. After all, they could only kill me, and I was reconciled to the idea of death.

Mang Po did not reply for a while. When he spoke, his voice was level but there was a note of determination in it which I could feel though I did not see his face.

He said, "It is true a sea-rover's boat is not a hospital but neither are sea-rovers anything but men. You take a man captive, and wrench him from his familiar life and ask him to join your band. Can you throw him to the sharks before he has replied one way or the other? If he had agreed to join us on that day, he would have been a comrade. Should we turn a comrade overboard because he is sick? Shall we remember your words next time you are ill yourself, *Donpedo*?"

Mang Po burst out laughing. It was the usual raucous laugh I had heard before. His companions joined in the laugh and I could distinguish the deep guffaw of *Donpedo* from the

peculiar laugh of Mang Po.

Several more days passed and I was gradually reconciling myself to the idea of turning a sea-rover. It was not so much fear of life as gratitude to Mang Po that decided me. I felt a pang in my heart as I thought of Byanchar and all that it contained, but if Allah had ordained otherwise, of what avail would my struggles be? But it seems that fate was at last relenting towards me. Flood and tempest had twice smashed my happiness, but now tempest and flood rescued me from an ignominious fate.'

Malek paused. Nobody in the audience spoke, for they were all listening in tense silence. Malek allowed his eyes to rest on Nuru's window and began again.

'Yes, a tempest saved me from the life of a robber and gave me the chance of returning here in your midst. It was, I think, just a week ago that the storm began. I was still weak and stayed in bed most of the time. Mang Po came running in and strapped me to my bed. He also made fast the bed to the hull.

I stared at him in amazement. I could not understand what all this presaged. Mang Po must have seen the surprise in my face. With a smile in his eyes, he said, "I have often talked of throwing you to the sharks. Perhaps I am going to do so now." He added with his peculiar raucous laugh, "Only the sharks will get me as well."

Without giving me a chance to say a word, he rushed out. Even from my bed in the cabin, I could sense feverish activity on the ship. Men moved about quickly, short sharp words of command rang out and suddenly, I felt the boat lurch. Instinctively I caught my bed, for I had forgotten that I was tied to it. Then began a rolling and pitching that threatened to bring out of me even my mother's milk. I was sick and felt an emptiness in my stomach. I shouted as hard as I could, but what was the use? Pandemonium had broken out. I could only hear the wind shrieking through every corner and crevice in the boat. Like an unbroken colt, the ship reared and heeled. I felt as if I was in a churning bowl. Weak and hungry, the shaking made me dizzy and I must have fainted. When I

came to, the storm was still raging. It seemed as if a thousand devils had been let loose on the sea. They screamed and roared and kicked. I felt as if my whole body was aching from the blows. Again I lost my consciousness, and did not regain my senses till I found myself in the cottage of one of these fishermen—kindly souls who had rescued me from the clutches of the robbers and have now brought me back to my people.'

Malek stopped, but the audience wanted more details of the rescue. Malek turned to one of the fishermen and said, 'You tell the story, brother, for I was unconscious and do not know what happened.'

The fisherman fidgetted and made excuses, but when he found that his host was anxious to hear him, he told his story in a few brief words. They were out at sea when they felt the storm coming. Quickly they sought shelter on a sandbank which was one of their favourite haunts. They pulled up their boats on the bank and waited till the storm should pass. The sea rose up in anger and waves like mountains beat upon the shore. In all their life they had never seen such a storm. Suddenly in the midst of the storm, they saw a ship racing towards the bank. They had tried to warn the ship but the wind was too strong and drove the ship upon the bank. They came forward to help the stranded men, but the pirates—for it was the pirate ship—had instead attacked them. For a few minutes the fishermen were taken aback and did not know what to do, for they had with them only their fishing-nets and paddles. Suddenly one among them remembered an old story of a fight between pirates and fishermen and brought handfuls of powdered pepper and threw them into the eyes of the pirates. This novel form of attack was irresistible and soon they were able to take the pirates captive. After they had been disarmed and bound, the fishermen had gone into the hold of the ship and found poor Malek tied to his bed. They had rescued him and taken him to their home. When he was sufficiently well to stand the journey, they had rowed him over to Byanchar.

'And what happened to Mang Po?' suddenly asked Aziz.

'I do not know, for he was not among the captured pirates. During the height of the storm he was perhaps at the helm,'

MEN AND RIVERS

said Malek. 'His prophecy of feeding the sharks came true,' he added in a husky voice.

'But he has at any rate escaped the fate of the captured pirates,' said Asgar Mia.

CHAPTER V

About a week had passed and things were again settling down. Malek was beginning to feel as if he had never been away. His experience had only intensified his love for Nuru and he could see in her eyes that his love was returned. They were shy in one another's presence and yet they longed for one another's company. Life was like a dream, for after their terrible nightmare of separation, they were happy in being together. They radiated happiness on all sides and even Asgar Mia seemed happy in their joy. He seemed unaware of the passion that shone through their action and speech, or even if he was aware, he showed no signs of it. Old Aziz watched him in perplexed anxiety. Had he not spoken to the *Panchayat* about the love that had grown between the young people? Had not the *Panchayat* said that there can be no marriage between them?

Malek was restless and impatient. The stirrings of passion made him long for Nuru more and more, and yet he was too shy to approach Asgar Mia. He wanted Asgar Mia to suggest that he should marry Nuru. So intense was his longing that he was at times on the point of broaching the subject himself. It was most unusual and improper for a young man to speak to his elders about his own marriage. Between longing and shyness, days passed, but the strain was beginning to tell upon him. He felt that he must speak to somebody and decided that old Aziz would be the best man.

One afternoon, he called Aziz and said, 'Aziz *chacha*, you have been living with us long; you are like a member of the family. I must tell you something that I can no longer keep to myself, for it is killing me.'

Aziz nodded his head. 'I know all about it,' he said. 'Kulsum told me long ago, but the *Panchayat* has taken it into his head that it cannot be.'

Malek felt a catch in his heart. 'What are you saying?' he asked breathlessly. 'Do you know what I am referring to?'

'Of course I do,' said Aziz as he nodded his head. 'You

want to marry Nuru and I think Nuru wants to marry you. Kulsum told me about it years ago, but the *Panchayat* says that I am mad and Kulsum is dead.'

Suddenly he began to weep and the tears trickled down his weather-beaten face. 'I know that Kulsum is dead, I shall never see her again. Kulsum is dead—dead and gone for ever.'

He hid his face in his arms and bent his head into his knees. Sobs shook his whole frame and he would not lift up his head again. Malek stood staring at him for a moment or two—and then rushed into the house to search out Nuru.

Nuru was among the women, supervising the cooking. Malek burst upon her and said, 'Nuru, I want to speak to you. Will you come to your room for a minute?'

Nuru was astonished. She had never seen Malek so flushed and breathless, nor had he ever before talked like this. The women too were surprised, for it was unlike Malek to burst upon them. But they could guess the feelings between Malek and Nuru. They smiled slyly and nudged one another. As Nuru walked away, they whispered, 'You may as well try to cover fire with a piece of cloth.'

Nuru hurried to her room. Malek was impatiently pacing on the verandah, and as Nuru came in, he burst out, 'Nuru, what have I done to suffer like this?'

More and more surprised, Nuru could only lift up her eyes in mute questioning. Malek went on breathlessly, 'Nuru, you cannot know this love I have felt for you. If you had, you could not have remained so calm and self-possessed.'

Nuru interrupted him, 'Why do you say all this? What has happened?'

Malek said in a voice full of tears, 'Asgar *chacha* will not let me marry you.'

Nuru turned pale. Her voice shook as she asked, 'How do you know? Did you speak to him?'

Malek sadly shook his head. 'No, I did not speak to him, but Aziz *chacha* did, and he has refused.'

His face was haggard and the suffering in his eyes was terrible to see. 'Nuru, what shall we do now?'

Nuru felt her world reel. She could hardly see, for her

eyes were dim with tears. She clutched at the doorpost and looked at Malek through her tears. Never had she seemed so beautiful to him, with her pure face washed in tears and her eyes glowing like stars through a mist.

Malek felt a catch in his throat. He took a step forward and clasped her hands in his, 'Will you trust me, Nuru?' he asked, and his voice was humble and beseeching. 'Will you come with me and we can go away and marry? The old fisherman loves me. He will help us to go away from here.'

Nuru lifted her eyes and they were full of humble pleading and love, but she sadly shook her head. In a voice that was like the voice of the dead, she said, 'No, no, that cannot be. I love you, but I also love my father. He has been both father and mother to me and this will break his heart.'

Again Malek pleaded with her. Sometimes his words were warm with love and passion, and sometimes they were full of suffering and tears. In spite of all his pleading, Nuru would not change her mind.

Suddenly a tall shadow fell in the room and they saw Asgar Mia standing before them. Nuru snatched her hands from the grasp of her lover and flung herself at her father's feet. She clasped his knees and the tears she had so long kept back flowed in an irresistible stream. Malek drew back a step and glowered in anger. He seemed to think that the old man would hit him, and his eyes were full of hatred and anger, but as he looked at Asgar Mia's face, he quickly lowered his head. For in Asgar's Mia's face there was not a trace of anger—only infinite pity and sadness and love.

Asgar Mia stooped down and gently stroked Nuru on the head. 'My child, my poor suffering child,' he said.

Malek regained his composure first. In a voice he was trying hard to control, he asked Asgar Mia, 'Why do you oppose Nuru's marriage with me?'

Asgar Mia smiled, but it was a pale and wan smile. He answered by asking a question in reply, 'Do you think I would oppose it unless I had to?'

Malek smiled in disbelief. 'You are your own master and if you have no objection, who is there to compel you?'

Asgar Mia shook his head. 'We are not our own masters, my son,' he said. 'This marriage would be against the law of blood.'

Malek flushed in anger. 'I should have thought so,' he said bitterly. 'An enemy is always an enemy and a father's enemy can never be the son's friend.'

A deep sigh shook Asgar Mia's frame and he did not speak. Nuru lifted up her face from her father's knees and looked at Malek with eyes full of reproach. Malek himself felt a little ashamed as soon as he had uttered the words. In a blind impulse to justify himself, he continued, 'What other reasons can there be for your objection? Is it not because I am Nazu Mia's son that you are refusing to give your daughter to me?'

Asgar Mia lifted up his face. In a deep voice, he said, 'Allah knows that I would have given Nuru to you if you had been only Nazu Mia's son.'

He paused for a second and continued in a more passionate voice, 'You think that I want to cause you suffering out of enmity to Nazu Mia, but why should I make my own daughter suffer? Am I not hurting my Nuru in refusing marriage between you?'

'Then why don't you agree to our marriage?' asked Malek angrily.

'I have already said that the law of blood will not permit it,' replied Asgar Mia in his deep voice.

'Why do you speak in riddles? Why can't you be plain?' Malek spoke impatiently.

'Must you hear the reason? Is it not enough if I say that there can be no marriage between you and Nuru?' asked Asgar Mia in a sad tired voice and he looked at Malek and Nuru.

Malek shook his head. Nuru lifted her eyes at her father in silent entreaty.

'Be it then as you wish,' said Asgar Mia at last.

He stood up and said, 'Come with me, Malek. Nuru, put a scarf round you, you must also come with me.'

He did not speak another word till they had reached the small hillock by the sea. Full of awed surprise, neither Malek

nor Nuru had any word to say, but their hearts were full of wild forebodings.

The old man did not stop till he reached the grave of his wife. He sighed that they should sit on the grass by the grave while he himself stood at its head. In silence they obeyed and looked up at him as he stood like a statue.

Asgar Mia lifted up his hands. 'Allah knows,' he cried, 'that I have tried to spare your memory, my dear. I tried my best, but I have failed.'

He turned with a swift gesture towards Malek and Nuru. 'There can be no marriage between you,' he said, 'because you are brother and sister—born of the same mother.'

Malek and Nuru were staggered at his words. Nuru raised up her startled eyes to him, and Malek could only lamely repeat, 'Nuru's mother is my mother?'

Asgar Mia nodded his head silently.

Again Malek asked, 'This then is my mother's grave?'

Again Asgar Mia nodded his head.

Malek leapt to his feet. His face was distorted with anger and hate.

'It cannot be—it cannot be,' he shouted. 'You lie—you lie, I say.'

Asgar Mia drew himself to his full height till he seemed to tower over the whole landscape. His face was grave and there was no anger in his voice.

'Why should I lie, my son?' he asked in a sad voice. 'You are distracted with grief, otherwise—nobody has yet called Asgar Mia a liar and lived.'

The cold words seemed to sink like a steel blade into Malek's consciousness. He crumpled down to the ground and a storm of tears shook his whole frame.

Suddenly he raised his face. In a broken voice, he asked, 'Am I not then Nazu Mia's son?'

The question shook Asgar Mia to his very depths. In a voice throbbing with pain, he said, 'What would I not give to claim you as mine, but Allah knows, you are Nazu Mia's son.'

Malek felt as if his head would burst. His voice was full of perplexity as he said, 'I cannot understand it at all. You

say I am Nazu Mia's son and yet you say I am Nuru's brother and this is my mother's grave? How can this be, for my father and my grandmother always told me that my mother died when I was an infant at arms.'

'To them she may have been dead, but in reality she lived only after she left your father's house,' replied Asgar Mia in a voice full of emotion.

Again Malek leapt to his feet. 'You must explain it all,' he cried in agony. 'So long I have honoured the memory of my mother as dead and I have honoured Nuru's mother for her kindness to me, but now, must I think evil of one who you say was Nuru's mother as well as mine?'

Asgar Mia lifted up his hand in stern rebuke. 'Banish evil thoughts from your mind,' he said. 'Your mother was purest of the pure. You must never think evil of the dead and least of all, of your mother who was an angel from heaven.'

Malek flung himself upon the grave and wept bitterly. 'Mother, mother—are you really my mother? Speak to me, for I am distracted and do not know what to say or think.'

Asgar Mia turned his eyes upon his daughter. Silent tears flowed down her cheeks and she sat motionless like a frozen statue. Asgar Mia felt his heart go out to her.

'My child, my poor child,' he said and came and sat by her. She hid her face in his lap and went on weeping silently and quietly.

Suddenly she lifted up her tear-stained face to him and said, 'Tell me everything father,' and hid her face in his lap again.

Malek also lifted up his head from the ground and said, 'Yes, tell us everything.'

Asgar Mia placed his hand on his daughter's head and began. 'You do not know but at one time I had no better friend than Nazu Mia and Nazu Mia also loved me more than his own brother. So deep was our friendship that people used to laugh at us. We did not mind, for the love in our heart was deep and sincere. Together we left our homes and came to seek our fortunes by the banks of the Padma. Together we prospered and grew into a flourishing village. Would to Allah

that one of us had died then !'

Asgar Mia sighed and continued, 'As we prospered, we thought of marriage and looked about for brides. That was the beginning of our misfortunes, for it was over a woman that our deep friendship turned into bitter enmity. Strange are the ways of Allah, for love that should unite men is more often a cause of division and hatred. I said we looked round for brides. So far as I was concerned I did not have to look around, for since my childhood I had loved my cousin Amina.'

'Amina ?' uttered Nuru in surprise, 'but that is my mother's name.'

'Yes, my child. It was your mother I loved her since my boyhood days. Ever since I was a young child, I had looked upon her as my bride. Your grandmother, she was my aunt, used to call me son-in-law even then. I came to the banks of the Padma to seek my fortune, and when I owned my own plot and my own cattle, I decided it was time to go home and marry. Nazu Mia came with me, for we came of the same village and he also would find a bride for himself. Amina was then fifteen, and she was beautiful like a houri. Malek, you all call نورو beautiful and my Nuru is pretty, but if you had seen your mother when she was fifteen, you would have admitted that Nuru is nothing beside her. Well, we came home and I went to my aunt and said that now I wanted to marry Amina and take her to Dhuldi with me. My aunt seemed to fall from her skies.

"But who said Amina will marry you ?" she asked in shocked surprise.

"Why, auntie," I replied, "ever since we have been young children, you have said that we are meant for one another. Don't you remember you used to call me little son-in-law ?"

She burst out laughing. "You will never grow up, Asgar," she said. "Can't you even understand a joke ? You were a handsome boy and we used to play with you."

She laughed and joked but in fact she made up her mind. I entreated, I begged and I stormed, but it was of no use. I told her that Amina also loved me, but she wouldn't listen to me. "Of course, she loves you like a brother," she said, "but

marry Amina to you, why I might as well throw her into the Padma?"

And she took good care to see that I should never find Amina alone. Day and night she guarded Amina and wouldn't let her go out of sight for a moment. I was desperate, but what could a distracted young man do against the wiles of a shrewed and crafty mother?

To add to my suffering, I one day heard that there was talk of marriage between Amina and Nazu Mia. I could hardly believe the rumour and wildy rushed to my aunt.

"What is it I hear?" I cried. "Are you going to marry Amina to—"

She would not let me finish. "What a silly boy," she laughed. "Do you think Amina is going to remain unmarried all her life? Of course I am trying to marry her. Only I want to marry her to somebody who has substance and not a vagabond who has hardly five acres of his own."

"But I am not a vagabond," I cried. "I went barehanded to the Padma and already I have five acres of land besides cattle and stock. Give Amina to me, auntie, and I promise you she will never want anything."

"Five acres indeed!" she snorted. "Why, look at Nazu Mia who went along with you. Already he has more than thirty acres. And see, how steady and sober he is. If he goes on as he has begun, he will end by owning hundreds of acres. Why, he will perhaps become a landlord himself."

My worst suspicions seemed confirmed. Torn between jealousy and anger, I cried, "Are you thinking of marrying Amina to Nazu Mia?"

I looked so frantic and wild that even she was taken aback for a moment. Quickly she recovered herself and said, "What if I am? Isn't he in every way a more desirable match than you?"

I pleaded with her. "You are my aunt and you are Amina's mother. Don't spoil our lives and don't create bad blood between friends."

She laughed contemptuously and said, "I don't know if I will give Amina to Nazu Mia or not, but I do know that I

won't give her to an effeminate creature like you."

I rushed to Nazu Mia. I found him talking with an old man who acted as the *mattabur* of the village. I shouted, "What is this I hear, Nazu? Are you thinking of marrying Amina?"

"Why, isn't she a nice girl?" returned Nazu Mia. "I have often heard from you how sweet she is. Now that I have seen her, I think she will make me a fine wife."

"But she is my bride," I protested.

"Your bride?" echoed Nazu Mia in cold contempt.

I was wild with rage and could not control myself. I shouted at him, "Of course, she is my bride and you know it yourself. Are you trying to steal my bride?"

Nazu Mia asked with biting irony, "Is it my fault if your own aunt prefers me to you as her daughter's husband?"

"You have bewitched her. She is mad and doesn't know what she is doing," I said.

Nazu Mia flared up. "I don't want to hear you any more. I have seen Amina and marry her I will. Your aunt has also agreed to my suit. Who are you to interfere?"

I threatened him and said that I would never let the marriage take place, but he only smiled in contempt. I entreated him and reminded him of our past friendship. I begged him not to ruin my life, but he taunted me and laughed at me. I was frantic and tried my best to prevent the marriage, but what could I do? My aunt was rich so was Nazu Mia. They had me confined and did not let me out till a month after the marriage. When Nazu Mia was starting for his home with his wife, I could have killed him, but I looked at Amina as she stood by his side and felt a catch in my heart. After all she was now his wife. If I killed him it would hurt her as well. Without a word, I left my ancestral home and returned to Rahimpur, because I had nowhere else to go.

Asgar Mia stopped for a minute and looked at Malek. "You are bitter today, Malek," he said, "and perhaps you think I have been hard. Believe me, you cannot imagine my bitterness and suffering after your father married my chosen bride. My sufferings increased when I heard it rumoured that she was

not happy. Nazu Mia was short-tempered and suspicious, and he thought that his wife did not love him enough. Nor could he forget that I had once loved her and he was afraid that perhaps she returned my love. And as for me, I was going to the dogs, for what did I care now that I had lost my chosen love?

To cut a long story short, Amina grieved not only for her own ruined life but also for me. One day she secretly sent for me and begged that I should mend my ways. I could not resist her entreaties and promised to her that I would in future live a straight and honourable life. Allah is my witness that I have tried to keep my word. Since that time I never sinned knowingly.

'Nazu Mia heard of our meeting and he grew bitter against his wife. He scolded and even beat her, but she bore all his torture in silence. There were men of evil tongue and their talk increased his bitterness. Soon after you were born, Malek, your father's suspicion and jealousy flared up. He charged your mother with faithlessness, divorced her and sent her home in disgrace. My aunt had in the meantime died, and your mother was left alone in the world. Not that she was without relations, but they felt that disgrace keenly and refused to take her back into the family. Forsaken by all her kinsmen, she tried to drown herself, but Allah did not will that she should die and I was able to rescue her. I begged her to marry me but she would not at first consent, "for," she said, "I cannot join my tainted life to yours." I pleaded with her and told her that my life's happiness was centred in her. At last she agreed, and I knew happiness beyond my wildest hopes. When Nuru was born, the cup of my happiness was filled. To guard against evil tongues, I never brought Amina to Dhuldi till Nazu Mia was dead. And after that you know the rest.'

EPILOGUE

For a while nobody spoke. The sun was resting upon the waves. Boats returned to the shore with their evening loads. Slowly lights began to twinkle in distant cottages, but they sat in silence by the sea shore and did not speak.

At last Malek spoke. His eyes were tearless but there was the shadow of despair in them. In a dead and lifeless voice he said, 'Why did you not tell this to me before? Why did you allow me to look at Nuru with a lover's eyes to tell me now that she is my sister and I cannot love her with a husband's passion?'

Asgar Mia did not reply. He gently placed his hand on Nuru's brow and said, 'Will you also accuse your father, my child?'

Gently Nuru shook her head. She seemed suddenly to have grown into an aged woman. She took her father's hand in both her hands and murmured, 'My poor father.'

Tears welled up in Asgar Mia's eyes. He said, 'My children, would to Allah you had both been my children in fact—do not be hard on me. I did as I thought best and I wanted to protect your young lives from the shadow of doubt.'

Nuru placed her face upon her mother's grave and wept. 'Why did you not tell me, mother? Why did you not tell me in time?' she wailed.

Malek stood up. Asgar Mia and Nuru looked at him but he would not look at them. He looked away over the sea where the last rays of the sun were glimmering in the west. His voice seemed to come from far away as he said, 'Goodbye, Asgar *chacha*, goodbye Nuru. May Allah have mercy on you both.'

'Where are you going?' asked Asgar Mia in a broken voice. Nuru also looked at him with eyes full of silent appeal.

'No,' said Malek and sadly shook his head. 'I must go away. I must go far away and forget if I can. How can I look upon Nuru as my sister now? All my youth's dreams were woven round her—will a word unweave them so suddenly?'

Asgar Mia did not raise his head. He['] looked at the grave of his wife and said, 'We are men of the river. We are peasants. We build our homes on sand and the water washes them away. We build again and again, and we till the earth and bring the golden harvest out of the waste land.'

Malek replied, 'I also am a son of the river. I too must build my home on sand. But the old must die before the new can be born. I must go away, Asgar *chacha*, and who knows, perhaps one day I might return.'

Asgar Mia did not speak to Malek again. To himself he muttered, 'The river must change its course and leave behind old familiar banks. But the river returns. It never forgets the old channels.'

He stood up and called to Nuru. 'Nuru, my little mother, let us go home,' he said.

Silently Nuru got up and followed him. As long as they could be seen, Malek gazed at them. Asgar Mia did not turn once but Nuru turned back again and again and looked at Malek with longing and sorrow. Several times, she lingered, but still in the end she followed her father to her home.

Malek sat by his mother's grave—alone and in silence. In the western sea boats laden with rich merchandise sailed away. Boatmen sang their songs and played on their flutes. The day died in the west and night enveloped the earth. When the night grew late, Asgar Mia came out to his wife's grave, but the young man had disappeared and was nowhere to be found.

